

THE
FATAL GARLAND

BY

SRIMATI SVARNA KUMARI DEVI

ENGLISH EDITION

BY

A. CHRISTINA ALBERS.

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INTRODUCTION.

This story which has some events of Indian history of the 14th Century as its background, contains much of Indian philosophy, which gives it its main value. We trust it will do something towards making our Western friends better acquainted with Hindu ideas. It is remarkable how little even Englishmen who have lived for years in this country in many cases understand Hindu thought. The Hindus have struggled for many centuries and under different foreign rules, and they have maintained their originality under the greatest difficulties and hardships, a little of which this book shows. We further see by it that the martial spirit which is now almost entirely lost, was very strong in those days. With this exception the customs, manners, thoughts and tendencies of the people are greatly the same to-day as they were in the days to which this tale carries us back.

A. C. ALBERS.

DEDICATION.

DEAR FRIEND,

I wove a flowery chain
Which on my heart has lain
Hidden, for many a day.

I hold it in your sight
To-day, but sad its plight
Of crumpled disarray.

Wilt thou take it from me,
Coldly, or lovingly,
Wilt thou accept it, say ?

THE FATAL GARLAND

CHAPTER I.

YONDER glisten the waters of Mohipal Lake. An avenue of stately bakul trees winds its way to the water's edge. On it are walking two little girls side by side eager to reach the shore. The waters of the lake are dark and gloomy, made darker still by the surrounding trees. At a distance a boat lies tied to its moorings. The wind moves the water, and the little craft sways restlessly on its undulating bosom, soon striking the shore, again repelled by it, as if eager to break away to find its liberty upon the great main. But like the woman who finds her soul's cry for freedom break against the zenana walls, who must be satisfied to see of life only so much as its loop-holes provide, so this little restless craft has to be satisfied with the space relentless fate affords it.

And now the little girls reached the water's edge, they stood beneath the shading trees and glanced sadly at the boat. There it stood indeed, but it was empty. Presently one of them spoke, "Has not Raj-

kumar* come, Didit?" It was Nirupama, who said this. She was ten years old, but her words sounded like those of a little child, there was a lisping sound in them, which gave them a sweet charm. Her friends admired her for this and loved to hear her speak. There was only one against whose ears her words seemed to grate, and that was Shaktimoi, the little companion who stood beside her now. Whenever Nirupama spoke Shakti laughed at her, until the little girl became quite timid in Shakti's presence and liked not to be near her. And still they were ever together, these little maids, inseparable as light and shade. As if drawn towards Shakti by some unknown power, Nirupama was ever by her side.

No one came so early to the gardens by the lake as did Shakti, no one returned so late, and Nirupama followed her instinctively, for both were moved by one desire--to see the young Prince who came there every day. The garden belonged to the Raja and was set aside as a play-ground for the children of the nobility.

Little Nirupama had spoken in the excitement of the moment, but now she stood abashed and half afraid of the ridicule that was sure to come. But, no, little timid maiden, this time your sweet lisping words pass unreproached. Shakti seemed not to

* Son of a Raja.

† Sister, a term of affection generally applied to the elder sisters and friends in Bengal.

have heard her. "Come, let us go into the water and pick lotuses," was all she replied to Nirupama's remark.

Go into the water! Nirupama was a timid child, she dared not do that. "I shall fall," she stammered nervously, "I will sit here and make a bakul chain." Shakti was not accustomed to have her requests refused by Nirupama. She knit her arched black brows and said in a voice that rang with authority, "You must go". She was but two years older than her little playmate, but Nirupama was terribly afraid of her. Yet like an echo of the words she had spoken before came the next refusal from her trembling lips. "I will not go," she murmured. This reply was "unexpected. Shakti stamped her foot upon the ground in naughty temper, she put on the air of an insulted queen and asked sharply, "You will not go?" "No," faltered the timid Nirupama. "No? But you shall," and with these words Shakti seized the frightened girl's hand and dragged her along.

The child grew desperate in her fear and screamed, "I will not go," nervously struggling to free herself. Just then two little girls appeared from behind the trees.

"Shakti, where are you dragging Nirupama?" they exclaimed, "What is the matter?"

Now Shakti let go of Nirupama's hand. "Just fancy," she called out disgusted, "I want her to come into the water with

me to pick some lotuses, and she will not."

Poor Nirupama was the picture of despair; she looked at her two little friends piteously and stammered, "I shall fall".

"Poor little baby, she will surely fall," laughed Shakti.

"She is really such a tiny thing," replied Kusum, one of the new comers. "Let her go. Come, I will go with you to get the flowers."

Kusum and Shakti stepped into the water to gather lotuses, while little Kamini wiped the tears from Nirupama's frightened face.

"How pretty the ground looks with all the bakul flowers that have fallen," she said soothingly, "Come, we will gather them."

And now, ere yet the tears were fully dried, a smile came upon Nirupama's pretty face. She opened her left hand, "See," she said triumphantly, "I have brought a ball of thread. I will make a bakul wreath and give it to the Rajkumar."

It was the month of Phalgoon (March). The short season which makes a slight attempt at cold, and which is called winter in Bengal, was just over. The young spring wafted its scented breezes through the branches of the bakul trees and the leaves whispered a sweet song of awakening life. Thick hung the clusters of mango-flowers; they opened their tender tinted leaflets and sent their fragrant welcome to all who came to the forest. From afar came the mysterious call of the Cuckoo, and

the *Papia* mingled its song with the perfume of the blossoms that fell in abundance to the ground, as if to bless the earth. Through this melodious, fragrant woodland the little maidens wound their way, and filled the end of their *Saries** with newly fallen bakul flowers. Then they returned to the water's edge and squatted down leisurely, and four little hands began to weave garlands of the flowers of spring.

CHAPTER II.

It was the time of twilight, that mellow hour between dusk and darkness, when the drooping sun sends mystery into the atmosphere. The scarlet West shed its golden lustre to kiss the dark waters of Mohipal Lake. And an enchanting scene they beheld, these descending rays, on which they seemed to linger fondly. Between the slender lotuses swam two Indian girls, charming in the excitement of their play, the flush of youth upon their rosy cheeks. And the crowns of the scarlet flowers vied with the brightness of these fair young faces that moved amongst them, while the Lake seemed to laugh in silvery ripples wherever the maidens moved.

They were meet companions for a prince, these daughters of old Indian blood. Still young they were, mere children, and yet

* The dress of the Indian women.

that fine old Oriental aristocracy was stamped on their brow, shone forth from their stately slender forms and spoke through their bearing and manners. Nor were they inferior in caste to the Raja himself, and their fathers were officiating ministers of the Court. Perhaps Shakti's father was less favoured by fortune, he was one of the superintendents of the Royal Armoury. But he claimed to have royal blood in his veins and to trace his descent from the kings of Jodapore. At a time, now long ago, when sorrow had come to the house of Jodapore, some of its princes had sought refuge in Dinajpore, and finding it hospitable remained. Later, the children of the two royal houses had intermarried. And so, although his position at Court was not as high as that of some of his castemien, Shakti's father carried his head as high as any of them and considered himself by right of birth in no way inferior to his master, the Raja, himself.

Meanwhile the little girls that had gathered the bakul blossoms, were working still to weave their wreath. Kamini cast a glance at the water now and then, but little Nirupama was intent on her work. And now the two who had been swimming among the lotuses, had finished their charming task and emerged like mermaids from the sea, their long black hair glistening in the evening light, lovely as fairies, carrying their beautiful load of rosy flowers. They ap-

proached their little companions and threw down their pretty burden.

"How beautiful they are," exclaimed Nirupama, seeing the lotuses on the ground before her. "I will take one and give it to the Rajkumar."

"Indeed?" retorted Shakti angrily, "we must take the trouble of gathering them, and you will give them to the Rajkumar. I see you have courage enough at other people's expense. You will not get a single flower, now then." Poor Nirupama, how sad she suddenly looked!

Kamini's mind was on another subject. "Girls," she said; "you have picked too many flowers. The Rani may not have enough for her *Pujah** to-morrow. Then what will happen?"

"She will never know who picked the flowers," interrupted Shakti.

Kamini did not heed her. "I wonder," she continued, "whether it is really true that a husband becomes devoted to his wife if she offers a hundred lotuses to Shiva every day."

Kusum and Kamini were both married, although they were still mere children, one being thirteen, the other fourteen.

"My mother says," replied Kusum eagerly, "that the Rani won her husband's love by offering one hundred lotuses daily at the shrine of Shiva. He did not love her some years back, but since she commenced the

lotus-offering she twines him round her fingers like warm wax. I understand your sister's husband is not pleased because she is remaining in her father's house at present. Why does not she make some offerings to Mahadev,* and her husband will consent to all she does?"

"How could she get one hundred lotus flowers daily?" replied Kamini. "Besides, my mother says there is still another reason for the Rani's daily floral offering. The astrologers foretold danger for the Prince, and to avert this, the Rani performs her daily worship in this way. It is owing to this prediction that he has not as yet been married. The danger will be over this year."

The children did not, however, worry long over evil augury. "What fun it will be when we get a new Rani," exclaimed Kusum light-heartedly. "I wonder, what she will be like."

"Won't it be delightful if she will be like our Nirupama?" laughed Kamini.

Nirupama's sweet young face became radiant, the wreath fell from her hand. "Yes, Didi, I will be the Rani," she exclaimed in childlike eagerness.

Kamini kissed the pretty girl and laughed. "Very well then, you shall be the Rani. Come let us play 'King and Queen.' You be the Queen, darling, I will be the Queen-mother, Kusum may be the maid of honour,

* Another name of Shiva.

and—." "And what am I to be?" interrupted the impatient Shakti.

"You may be the maid-servant," was Kamini's laughing reply.

Shakti's beautiful black eyes flashed like sparks of fire, she tossed her proud young head and retorted, "No, indeed, I will be the Queen, and Nirupama may be the maid-servant."

Poor little Nirupama, she was just going to open her lips in protest when over the lake the strains of a distant flute were heard. Suddenly the little maid seemed filled with delight, and joyfully she exclaimed, "Here comes the Rajkumar."

And now the little maidens joined in the song of which the Rajkumar was playing the tune on the flute. They took hold of each other's hands, and pretty, crimson-tinted feet danced to the rhythm.

"My heart is filled with many a lay,
Ah tell me, friend, what shall I do?
I try to sing the livelong day
In rapt'rous melodies anew
Of that great beauty sans compare
In heaven above, on earth below.
My heart would sing of beauty rare,
But lo, my flute has turned my foe.
Pain would I with the flute's sweet strain
Arouse compassion in her heart.
But my desires are all in vain,
Vain are my efforts, vain my art.
My flute betrays me,
When I play
Naught does it say
But 'Radha,' 'Radha' all the day.

When I would sing of beauty's fame
My flute sings naught but Radha's name."

"Well then, let the prince choose his own princess," suggested Kusum as the music ceased.

"That will be the best way," returned Kamini.

When the music ceased a stately youth about sixteen years old, stepped on shore and joined the four chatting little ladies.

Kamini did not wait for him to speak. "Now Rajkumar, you say who is to be the Queen, Shakti or Nirupama, we are going to play 'King and Queen.' I will be the Queen mother, Kusum the maid of honour and Nirupama—".

"Now stop," interrupted Kusum, "Rajkumar, you must say who is to be the Queen."

"Whose Queen?" demanded the young Prince, "and who is to be the King?"

"Why you, of course," answered the two girls simultaneously.

"I am to be the King and am to choose my Queen?" laughed the boy, and as he spoke he picked up the fallen wreath that Nirupama had woven with such anxious care. He put it around Shakti's neck and exclaimed, "Well then, behold her!"

Shaktimoi's beautiful young face lit up with proud delight, and there was in it a trace of that which marks the dawn of womanhood, while poor forsaken Nirupama looked on with tear-filled eyes.



THE PLAY "KING AND QUEEN."

And as he spoke he picked up the fallen wreath that Nirupama
had woven * * and put it around Shakti's neck.

The Fatal Garland Page 10

And now the girls playfully performed the marriage rite, not forgetting the accustomed vibrating sounds and other ceremonies that accompany it. They walked around the bridegroom in procession in which little Nirupama sadly joined. From afar came ringing through the woodland the sweet notes of the papia-like bridal song, to make the scene complete.

And then timid little Nirupama stepped up to the prince. Seeing she was not the Queen elect, she offered her life to him in another capacity. "Rajkumar," she said in her sweet lisping accent, "let Shakti be your Queen, and I will be your maid-servant."

CHAPTER III.

In the middle of the fourteenth century Bengal shook off the yoke of Delhi. After the death of Baharan Khan, Governor of Suvarnagram, in A. D. 1338, his follower Fakir-ud-din raised the flag of independence in East Bengal, while Ali-ud-din Ali Shah slew Kadar Khan, ruler of Lakkhanavati, and became sovereign of Western Bengal, establishing his capital at Pandua in the neighbourhood of Gour. Later Shams-ud-din Elias Shah, son of the foster-mother of Ali-ud-din, conquered eastern and western Bengal and in A. D. 1352 brought the whole kingdom under one sceptre. Firoz Shah, at that time emperor at Delhi, alarmed

at these events, came with an army into Bengal. Pandua was attacked. The sovereign of Bengal took refuge in the fort of Ekdala, about twenty miles from the capital. The Emperor laid siege to the fort, but finding it difficult to take, made peace and returned to Delhi. A few years later, in A. D. 1357, he was compelled to recognise the independence of Bengal. The ruler of that province, crowned with success, assumed with great pomp the proud title of Sultan.

In joyful commemoration of this triumph an annual fete was held at the capital. On this occasion feats of arms formed the principal entertainment. The winner of the day's tournament was honoured and rewarded by the Sultan himself.

And now in Pandua there was a day of merry-making. The revolving year had brought the annual festival, and to-day the tournament was being held. The palace court was gaily decorated and canopied by a many-coloured awning, to shade from the sun's fierce rays the throng of people that assembled there. Elias Shah, the first Sultan of Bengal, had laid down his earthly burdens. To-day it was his son, Sekander Shah, who sat on the throne. Raised on a high platform stood the Sultan's seat, supported by pillars and beautifully decked with leaves and flowers. Around him sat according to their rank his tributaries—Rajas, Chiefs, Zemindars

and the Gentry, gathered here from all parts of Bengal on the invitation of the Sultan.

Around this court the venders displayed their wares. India was famous for her industries in those days, and the stalls exhibited the product of her looms, costly silks, fine muslins. The jeweller offered ornaments of finely wrought designs and workmanship in gold and silver; jewel-studded arms were displayed in other places, and gold embroideries glistened in the sun. The flower-stalls shed their fragrance afar, and the provision-vender invited the hungry to take repast. The dealer of destiny, that inevitable individual in the East, was not absent. Many were the astrologers who had set up their stalls, and they were not few in number who left their hard-earned coins in exchange for a load of promises of things to come. There was among these fortunetellers one who was more eagerly sought than the rest. Customer after customer came to him, till the poor prophet, overwhelmed by his good fortune, and unable to satisfy all their demands, became exasperated and was ready to throw his profits to the winds and fly, when suddenly an unusual figure appeared in his little stall. It was a woman young and beautiful. She stepped gently forward and offered her hand for inspection.

Great is the penetrating power of beauty, and the astrologer could not refuse her. He took her left hand in his and looked at it

one moment and then gazed at the entrancing charm of her queenly face with amazement. The by-standers noticed his plight. They too were impressed by the dignity of her bearing, and as they looked at her beautiful face were charmed no less than the astrologer.

"Who is she?" ran the murmur through the crowd.

"Have you ever seen such beauty before?"

"She is Lakshmi* herself."

"Thakur,"† called out one, "can you read her destiny in her face? Look at her hand if you want to see it." "The Thakur reads hands only when his own is crossed with silver," put in another. The beautiful stranger offered him money, but he refused to take it saying, "Mother, you are destined to become a great Queen. From you I will take no money. Accept this prophecy as a humble offering from me."

Just then a stately horseman passed the crowd. His glance fell on the beautiful maiden. He suddenly stopped his horse, he looked like one overcome by surprise. The fair stranger was unknown to him, and yet like a vision from a former life loomed up the memory of a face like hers, of one he knew and yet knew not. It seemed as if her dazzling beauty kept him spell-bound, his gaze was riveted upon her for a while, and then he moved on slowly. Along the

* Goddess of wealth and beauty.

† Title of respect applied to Brahmins in Bengal.

chords of memory ran a scene of bygone days. He suddenly saw before him a summer day by the shores of a silver lake. Four pretty maidens were playing in the garden that ran to the water's edge. Of these one was fairer than the rest, her long black hair was glistening in the sun, her garments were dripping still, for she had gathered lotus-flowers in the lake. And then he felt the touch of a little hand clasping his own, and there was the children's play of a marriage ceremony. His thoughts seemed to have overpowered him, for he was like one oblivious of his surroundings. But his steed was in another mood, he raised his stately head impatiently and neighed, for from the field of the tournament came the sound of the herald's trumpet, calling the competitors to the target. The horseman heard the call, he laughed his thoughts away, and horse and rider disappeared from the crowd.

CHAPTER IV.

The tournament was partly over. All the games including those of wrestling, lance and sword, etc., were played; there now remained the feat of archery. Sultan Sekander Shah himself came forth to act as umpire. His horse was ready, and he descended from his lofty seat to mount it. The courtiers and the guests arranged themselves on either side of him, keeping respectfully in the rear.

At a short distance stood the target—a marble statue of a female figure holding to her lips a bird, which rested on her hand. The eye of the bird was the target, and it was to be pierced without the marble statue being touched, which required great skill in archery. This, the most difficult feat, was the last of the sportive exercises, and the crowd of spectators welcomed it with joyful impatience.

The royal officer in charge gave the signal, and the herald stepped forward, announcing three times with loud voice,

"Whosoever desires to distinguish himself at the feat of archery is commanded by His Majesty, Sultan Sekander Shah, to step forward."

A spirited black stallion appeared, impatiently neighing, while holding high its proudly arched neck. On its back was mounted a stately youth of noble bearing with bow and arrow in his hand.

The deafening shouts of the spectators ceased of a sudden and deepest silence reigned. It seemed all held their breath and gazed in eager expectation.

The youth approached the Sultan and offered the three-fold salutation. Then came the moment for which the excited crowd had waited anxiously so long. He stepped to the place assigned to the marksmen and shot an arrow, which ascended upward and was seen no more. A deafening shout from the assembled multitude rent the air, for

lo, the prize of archery was won. Ganesh Dev, Chief of Dinajpore, had hit the mark. The shouts prolonged, and a rain of flowers fell upon the Prince as he walked towards the Sultan to receive his trophy. The Sultan dismounted and presented the youth with the prize of archery, a costly sword, which with his own hands he girded on him, and then he bestowed on him the proud title of Maharaja Bahadur. The Chiefs of Dinajpore had been Maharajas to their people all along, but up to now the title had not been recognised by the new Government of Bengal.

Anew the shouts rang forth, and garlands were showered upon the hero. At a distance stood a woman ; she had seen the matchless feat performed. Around her neck she wore a withered garland. This she took and wound it round a small stone to give it weight, and then threw it at the Prince. But alas, the garland missed its goal and touched not the Prince, but the Sultan, and then fell to the ground. This was while the latter was engaged in girding the sword on the winner of the tournament. He was interrupted and raised his head in astonishment and vexation. The courtiers ceased pouring the rain of flowers and looked in alarm at their sovereign. But the young Crown-Prince, Nawab Ghias-ud-din, picked up the faded wreath and smiled.

“Ganesh,” he said, “who is it that salutes you with a faded wreath?” *

This was one of those timely remarks that pass off consternation. The Sultan smiled and finished his task. Anew the shouts of the multitude and the rain of flowers from the courtiers filled the air. And now a still stranger incident occurred. A woman, young and beautiful, garbed as a devotee, stepped forward from the crowd. She saluted the Crown-Prince and said, "Be pleased, Nawab Shah, to give me back my wreath." The Sultan, the princes and courtiers stared at her in amazement; while the Crown-Prince granted her request. The beautiful stranger took the wreath, looked at Ganesh Dev for a minute, then saluting the Sultan and his son departed with the same fearless dignity as she had come.

CHAPTER V.

It was evening. The sun sinking in the western horizon, brightened with its last golden rays the gentle murmuring waves of the Ganges and played on the tree-tops of the further shore, and then sank slowly lower and lower until the landscape saw the orb of day no more.

Raja Ganesh Dev rode by the river bank with slackened pace homeward bound. But the beauties of the evening scene he saw not, nor was his mind occupied by the victory and its reward of honour which had been his to-day. Ever and anew appeared

before his mental vision the girl in the devotee's garb. This day had brought a mystery upon him, a beautiful stranger with the self-possession and dignity that denotes high birth, and yet so poorly clad. Why had she looked at him so meaningly like one who recognised an old acquaintance? And then the incident of the faded wreath. Why had she thrown it into the assembly and why so proudly demanded it back from the Sultan's son himself? The mystery deepened the more he pondered over it. The gait and manners of a princess, the yellow garb of the sannyasini*, a strange combination this! And yet she could not be a devotee, her hair was not matted, for through her thin veil could be seen a loose carelessly twisted knot of luxuriant hair, resting on a beautiful neck. The string of sacred beads, the uncovered head and ashes on head and body, the insignia of the Indian devotee, these things were all absent. Above her forehead lay black silky waves of hair, and a few stray curls that fell over her brow, heightened the charm of an exquisite face. Her veil covered only part of her head, leaving her face free.

Was she a widow on pilgrimage to holy shrines? No, that could not be, for golden bracelets still graced her wrist. But again there are among the widows those whose sad lot has come upon them in their childhood. She might be one of those, and her

* Female devotee.

parents had perhaps not the heart to take these simple ornaments from her. If her husband still lived, he would not allow her to travel from place to place. That she might still be a maiden did not occur to him, for how could a Hindu girl remain unmarried so long? So he decided the matter in his mind. She must be a widow on pilgrimage. She was certainly high born, for every step proclaimed her dignified grace, her proud purity. Yet why those glances of sweet intimacy to a stranger? He did not know her, had never seen her before, what could that look mean? The young beauty was surrounded by a halo of entrancing mystery. Thus in deep thought the Prince rode slowly on with slackened reins, when suddenly his progress was impeded, and before him stood the beautiful stranger, smiling at him gently.

He looked like one before whom a vision suddenly appeared. Had then the events of the day been all a dream, and was he dreaming still? He was, however, not left to his reflections long. The figure advanced still smiling and addressed him with a silvery voice, "Prince, do you not know me? Have you forgotten the playmate of your childhood, have you forgotten the garden by the lake?"

A wave of memory passed over his mind and like one half dreaming still, he slowly spoke, "My boyhood's playmate, Shaktimoi?"

"You have to be reminded, and yet I knew you at a glance."

A quick emotion stirred the man's young heart, but it left him as quickly. Yes, he was Ganesh Dev, she was Shaktimoi, but there was a gulf between them. She was his childhood's dearest friend, he once had loved her with a youth's first love. But she was now another's wife. The natural delight of meeting a companion of early days, conflicted with the chivalrous feeling of distant respect due to another's wife. He did not even know how to address her under the present circumstances.

Shakti spoke again with the same friendly familiarity.

"Would you alight? All have done honour to your victory, may I not also have that privilege? Because my wreath is faded, will you therefore refuse to accept it?"

The Prince regained his self-possession and replied smiling.

"So it was you who threw a dead wreath in my honour."

"I meant to throw it in your honour, but it missed its goal, and now it is crushed and torn."

The Raja dismounted and smiling still, said,

"Why offered you a dead wreath, Shakti, was this meant as an honour or a taunt?"

The girl heeded not his question, but replied,

"Over yonder is a quiet place, where we may sit and talk together. Come with me, you may tie your horse there."

She led the way, and he followed her, bridle in hand.

CHAPTER VI. .

They entered a dense tamarind grove near the river side. A tree had been hewn down by wood-cutters, it lay half in the water and half on shore. On the trunk of this tree the girl took her seat. The Rajah had fastened his horse and now stood near her, resting his hand on a bow. The sun had set, but the grey shades of evening were yet to come. Still lingered in the west those crimson clouds, the after-glow of sunset, and cast a ruddy glow over the earth, reflecting in the river's rippling waves like glittering gold. They kissed with crimson hue the Indian maiden seated on the tamarind tree and enhanced her beauty a hundred-fold.

And fair she was with the glow of the twilight upon her. Her complexion was not the Champak-tinted seen so much in the beautiful women of Bengal, but radiant, fresh and rosy like that of a Persian beauty. Her figure was stately and queenlike, her brow broad and intellectual, the nose aquiline and the lips most delicately curved, the chin small and dimpled, her dark mysteri-

ous eyes were shaded by long black lashes, and black arched eye-brows made them appear deeper still, a striking personality, indeed, this maiden of old Rajpoot descent. There was an eager brightness in her face and a happy smile on her young lips, while soft ringlets enwreathed her brow, all of which stood out in strong contrast to the saffron-coloured garb she wore.

The Raja gazed and thought of fair Sakuntala in her lonely woodland dwelling. Involuntarily he repeated in his mind those words of Sakuntala's lover.

* "The lotus though encircled by mosses is beautiful. The moon when pale, holds much beauty. This girl, though garbed only in bark, is more beautiful than either. What better ornament is there than sweet beauty of form?"

Gazing on the fair young form before him, Ganesh Dev forgot his scruples, forgot that there was a gulf between him and this maiden. The woodland by the river side was changed into the playground of his childhood, where he in early days had played with Shaktimoi, the Queen of his young life. Unconsciously drawn towards her, he seated himself beside her on the fallen tree.

"Do you still play the flute as of old, Rajkumar?" The sound of her voice broke the silent spell, it touched him strangely and he sighed. He moved away, but still remained seated.

* Translation from Kalidasa's great Sanskrit Drama.

"Where is your flute, Rajkumar?" The girl repeated her question. "Do you not play now as in your early days?"

"As in my early days? Does the time that is gone ever return? A dream does not continue once the night is passed."

"But the night returns."

"Not to bring back a vanished dream."

Shakti's heart swelled with delight at these words.

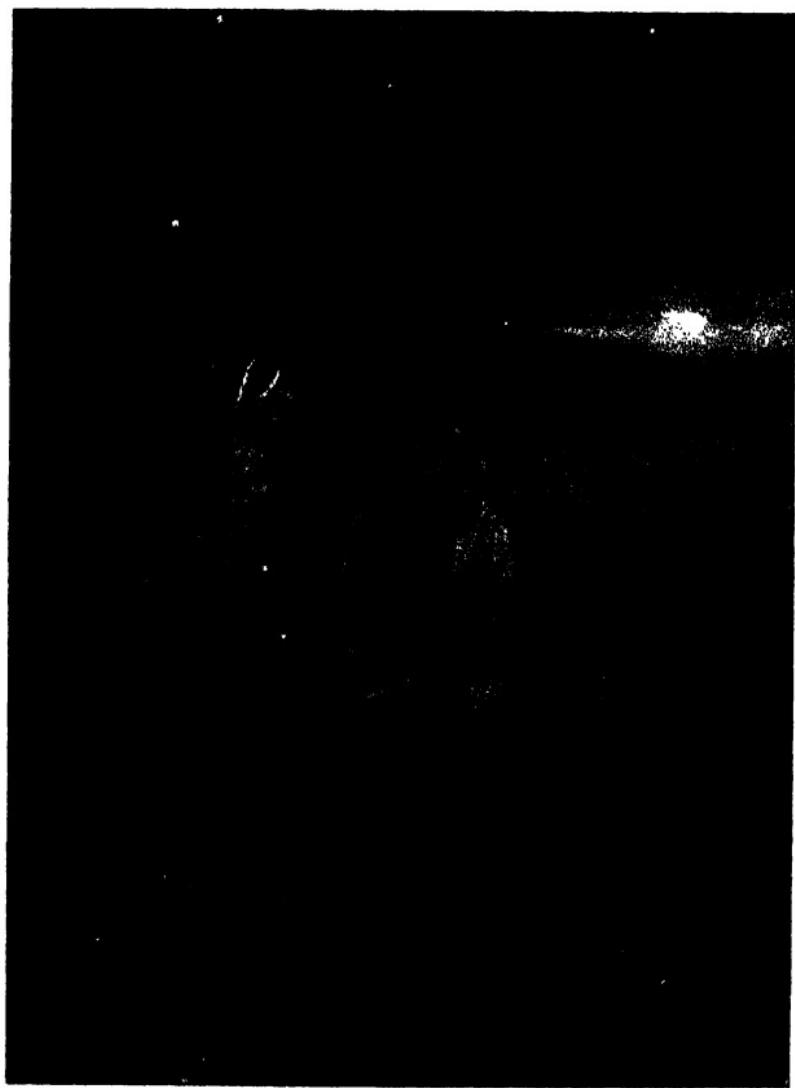
The maiden's soul soon grasped the truth. It was Radha's absence that made Brindabun dreary and the flute of Krishna dumb. Yes, he had suffered in her absence as well as she had longed for him. Before the heart is poisoned by the bitter experience of the world, its faith in love is infinite.

"But if the will be strong enough it can bring back old dreams. Have you already outgrown the delights of youth?" asked Shaktimoi, smiling still.

"If not all, at least many of them," he replied with a serious mien. "I am getting old, you know, I have a state to manage, the well-being of my subjects to see to. I am no longer a boy to spend my days in idle pleasures."

Ganesh Dev was twenty-two and still a boy at heart, but he delighted in assuming the gravity of age whenever the opportunity arose.

Ganesh Dev may no longer care for his flute, but Shakti still desires to hear it. "How could you, Rajkumar, ever abandon it? I



GANESH DEB AND SHAKTI ON THE RIVER BANK.

“Anney Ganesh Deb played—played the sweet tune of an old time song and Shakti listened with her whole heart and drank in every note.”

could sooner imagine Cupid without his bow or Krishna without his pipe, than Ganesh Dev without his flute."

"If that be so, I see my flute and I must never part," was the laughing reply and as he spoke he took from the folds of his princely garment the pieces of a small wooden flute and began to fit them together.

"The same old flute," exclaimed Shakti in delight.

"Yes, the same flute still."

Once when a little girl Shakti had taken this flute to the Rajkumar, she wanted to learn to play it, and he was to teach her. But soon she had grown tired of learning as girls will. But the Prince had kept the flute. And though it was but a common reed, its notes were sweet, far sweeter than those of his own gold-mounted instrument.

And now Ganesh Dev played —played the sweet tune of an old time song, and Shakti listened with her whole heart and drank in every note, as the parched plain absorbs the falling dew.

Over the silver wave
Softly we glide
Rocking to and fro
On the laughing tide.
The moon shines in the vaulted sky,
While gently on we float.
I the riches of the world are mine
Within my little boat
What more can I desire
Since she is mine ? •
Swiftly we glide upon
The foaming brine.

On yonder distant shore
 The people high,
 "A boatman out so late ?
 A storm is nigh."
 My heart laughs loud to see their fear
 While gently on I float.
 The minutes glide on silver wings
 Within my little boat.
 What more can I desire,
 Since she is mine ?
 Swiftly we glide upon
 The foaming brine.

The bliss of life is mine
 As on we fly,
 The stars laugh as we go
 My boat and I.
 All my desires are reached, my song
 Resounds from rock and cave.
 This boat of beauty is my own
 Upon the dancing wave.
 What more can I desire
 Since she is mine ?
 Swiftly we glide upon
 The foaming brine.

CHAPTER VII.

Ah ! the enchantment of that song. He sang it in those days of peaceful happiness, when in a boat together his little girl friends and he had glided over the silvery waves of Mohipal Lake. She knew it now, he loved her still. Her heart laughed with inward delight and merrily she said,—

" Is a reed-flute fit for the hands of a Maharaja ? I would like to take it from you and throw it into the river."

The Prince touched his jewelled sword, the prize of the day's victory.

"Shakti," his voice sounded full and manly, "behold this sword, it is a costly thing, and yet I would fling it from me sooner than part from this flute of mine, the one fond relic of the past. My life is no more dear to me than it."

Shakti threw back her veil and touched the withered garland round her neck. "Rajkumar, I too hold a relic of the past. Do you recall that afternoon when you threw a wreath around the neck of your boyhood's friend? I have kept it since that day and prize it dearer than my life. Therefore I threw it today when I saw you winner of the tournament. Now say, was this faded wreath an honour or a taunt?"

A thrill went through the man's young heart, but it lasted a moment only, and in an instant a cloud passed over his face. It was the training of the Hindu character that asserted itself. And custom for many generations has taught that a man may love and love again and be married to more than one wife at once if he desires or circumstances demand. But woman may love once only and merge her whole being in that one love, and if once married, no greater sin can she commit than harbour the thought of another in her heart. He still cherished Shakti's image, but that was no sin for him, for he had loved her long ago, ere yet another had claimed her hand. But if still she cared for

him, she sinned in this world and the world to come.

Shakti saw how grave he was, and she too became serious. She had taken the garland from her neck to put it on his, but now it remained in her hand.

"Is this the wreath with which we played in the garden by the lake?" asked the Raja sadly. "Shakti, it is your duty to forget old childhood fancies. Why do you harbour them still?"

"Have you forgotten?" and Shakti looked like one who had been deeply touched.

"I have not forgotten, that is my sorrow. Shakti, why did you leave us so suddenly?"

Ganesh Dev had tried to point out the path of duty, but he had only betrayed his own love. Shakti saw and forgot her wounded feelings.

"I never learned the reason for our hasty departure. One morning my father informed me that he was going on a pilgrimage and that I must accompany him. I wished to go to the palace to bid farewell to you, but my father would not wait, we had to leave at once. Since then, for six long years we have wandered. Daily anew I asked him to return to the old home, but the reply was ever the same, 'We must finish our pilgrimage.' I have been in Pandua for some time, and here lately my father passed away. Since then I have longed more than ever to return to the old home at Dinajpore. I had only just finished the mourning ceremony when I

heard of your coming to the capital. God alone knows what I have suffered all these years. This faded wreath has been my only ——."

"I thought you were another's wife," interrupted Ganesh in great surprise, "is it possible that you are still unmarried?"

"Does a woman wed twice?"

How beautiful she looked in the evening light, the light of her great love shining forth from her radiant face. The Raja bent his head, remorse stung his heart, he understood. Shakti loved and had remained true. She thought him faithful and refused her hand to another. But alas for her great passion and her faith, Ganesh Dev had found his bride and was happy in the love she gave him. Yet in the midst of all these mingled emotions that crowded upon him, he felt a thrill of joy that no man yet claimed Shaktimoi.

"The Prince is married perhaps?" was Shakti's anxious querry. He answered not. The minutes passed in heavy silence.

"And why went you away so suddenly?" It was the Prince who broke the spell at last.

It was enough. Shakti's maiden instinct read the answer in this question. "And Ganesh Dev forgot?" Her voice sounded strangely sad as she spoke.

"No Shakti, not that." The man's voice betrayed the strong emotions that filled his breast. "My mother told me that you had

been taken away to have your marriage performed. I thought you to be the wife of another."

Shakti's ancestral home was not at Dinaj-pore, but in Debcoite, a place some distance from the former. It being a frequent occurrence in India that parents take their children to their old home-stead to give them in marriage, no one had doubted the story Ganesh Dev's mother circulated.

It was the great sad moment of Shakti's life, and only a strong nature like hers could have borne it as bravely as she did. The tears mounted to her eyes, but they were quickly pressed back to the heart.

"Who is the Rani?" the question came as if the winds wafted it through the evening air.

"Nirupama."

CHAPTER VIII.

Unfortunate girl! Her young life tasted now love's bitterest fruit, for jealousy took hold of her with all its terrible force. She had spent her days in anguish, her life had been bereft of all comfort. But this ~~she~~ had heeded not, for in her heart burnt brightly on the ideal of her youthful love. But oh, the irony of it! This minute she had learned that he around whom her young

life's passion twined, had taken another to wife.

Oh God, why hast Thou made man and woman so unequal? Must man's smile be ever reflected in woman's tears? Must the one quench his thirst for life ever on the heart-blood of the other?

The Raja shuddered as he looked at Shakti's face, for she was a woman of strong emotions, and whatever force moved her came from the depth of a strong heart. He did not know the woman's power and would fain have touched on the sweeter chords of her nature only. Was this the Shakti of his boyhood's dream, the Shakti he had in vain tried to forget? Could such wild passions rage behind a form so fair?

But Shakti spoke, a tormented soul found words at last. "Ah Prince, your part has been well played, and thus will it ever be while yet there are men and women walking this earth together. We trust, and you deceive, we pine in silence in our love for you, while you flit gaily on from bloom to bloom and sip the sweets of life. We fall in worship at your feet, and you march on and trample over us—your sport, our death."

The Prince sat speechless, he was amazed. He thought he saw the woman as she really was, and he shrank from her. And from this angry form his thoughts wandered to the other, that gentle, tender, trusting one, who even this very minute silently awaited his home-coming, Nirupama, his wedded

wife. He pictured Shakti as his Rani, and that other, that delicate twining plant trampled upon and lying in the dust. The thought chilled him.

He had never yet been able to give his whole heart to her he called his wife, because his early love still lingered in his mind. Yet the passion of his bygone days was but a dreamy chord of memory, and when in Nirupama's presence he was happy. As the image of God in the mind of the worshipper, so reigned Shakti in his memory as a vision only ; he never thought that she was either good or bad. It was the worship of an exalted ideal, something beyond the reach of longing and desires. But Nirupama was his wedded wife, the mother of his child, the sharer of his joys and sorrows. His devotion to her lacked neither respect, nor tenderness, nor affection, but it was not that love that fills a man's whole being.

Still so far his wife's tender nature, her great devotion had satisfied him. But to-day, when the goddess of his dreams stood before him, when his soul's ideal had assumed tangible form, he suddenly became conscious of a great vacancy in his life. He had forgotten himself, forgotten the world, forgotten even Nirupama in the enchanting beauty of the figure before him.

But when Shakti's entrancing features became distorted by jealousy, he was roused from the spell that had bound him, and he tried to cast it all aside as a terrible illusion.

No, this was not the Shokti of his dreams, not the divinity, the ideal beauty that had hovered around his aspirations. Her soul was black, he saw it now. How pure was Nirupama in comparison to her. Would he for a moment slight the duty he owed her? Would he repay the boundless love she gave him by bringing into her young life a rival, force her to share his heart with another? His soul was touched at the thought of the suffering he would cause her and he remained silent.

CHAPTER IX.

Shakti's bitter reproaches, the forthpouring of her great sorrow seemed not to touch the Prince, he remained unmoved. But life has strange paradoxes, and haughty and imperious natures are under adverse circumstances often more easily subdued than those naturally patient and humble. The strong woman broke down chilled by the relentless coldness of the man she loved, and the rising moon saw Shakti weep the tears of a heart now crushed.

"Do not forsake me, Rajkumar," she pleaded at last. "You are a man, custom permits you to marry many times. Why do you cast aside an unfortunate one? Before the Eternal I am your lawful wife. I have but you alone in life, remember my father too is gone. If you forsake me, if I am

forced to wed another, my nuptials will be an unholy bond, and for that act of sin Ganesh Dev will have to answer." The change of the emotions from anger to sadness brought back the tenderer beauty to her face.

Shakti's voice had ceased, and in the woods there was no sound. And the Prince? —the Prince knew nought save that in the silver evening light he saw a moonlit face, tear-stained and melancholy, a face glorified by a divine emotion that shone forth from its exquisite features. The face distorted by passion was forgotten, all was forgotten, even the tender wife at home. He only knew that in the silent woodland he was alone with the maiden he loved, he was conscious only of the remorse of having wounded her. Instinctively he moved nearer. The lovelight shone from his deep black eyes as he gazed at her and tenderly held her slender hand in his. And now his heart would speak—speak those words of passionate devotion, of longing and aspiration, of a soul's mad desires, words that are old and ever new, that have been whispered since the dawn of time, and which youth and the moonlight alone can record.

But alas, Ganesh Dev, you are not to speak, there is another voice ringing through the moonlit stillness, and its message is not your message.

"Dishonour to thy race! touch not another's wife."

It was the mother, who returning from her evening worship by the Ganges riverside had seen her son. The mother's angry face he saw when the young Prince turned his head to see who spoke. Only a Hindu can realise the shame that overpowered him, for before his mother a Hindu remains a child always. She had caught him in a forbidden act, and he stood before her a shamefaced boy, who dared not lift his eyes from the ground.

But Shaktimoi's strong soul asserted itself. She stood up fearlessly and faced the angry woman. "Mother," her voice was clear and steady, "I am not another's wife. I am the true wife of the Prince. We married in the sight of God while still children."

The irate woman became more angry still, her voice trembled with passion as she spoke. "Ganesh, who is this woman? Is she not the daughter of Banowari Lal? Remember, son, if you take her to wife, the race of Pratap Roy Dev will become the lowest of the low. Banowari Lal's sister brought dishonour on her family, and he left Dinajpore. And this man's daughter my son's wife, the Rani of Dinajpore? That shall never be, while still I have a breath left in my body. Take her to live with you, if you will, but your lawful wife she may never be. Shame on your name, Ganesh, to harbour such a thought."

Shakti's strong nature was roused to its height; anger, scorn and insulted dignity spoke from her lofty brow as she threw back

her proud head and looked at the woman before her. There was defiance in her tone as she spoke.

"Maharani, you may have spoken as one of your lofty race should speak. But though it may not please you to hear it, the great God is just, and the law of Karma knows neither rich nor poor. And if the Divine Justice still exists, as sure as my love for your son is pure, so surely will he judge between you and me. And the day will come when your proud race will bend its knee before the humblest descendant of despised Banowari Lal, whom today you cast adrift with scorn. If this fails to come true, then know the Great Justice is dead."

She seemed like a creature from another world as she spoke. And now she turned and like a shadow glided amongst the trees and was seen no more.

But the curse remained, and she who had called it forth, she and her son, they stood as if struck dumb by those words of terror.

CHAPTER X.

As a meteor flashing through space gives one bright light and is then consumed by its own combustion, so man when carried to a supreme height by a strong emotion, soon finds himself exhausted and weak. The light of the soul cannot shine long on this dust-clad star, and the strong

nature that soars to its height must pay the penalty. Shaktimoi exhausted and weary felt like one left in a maze at dead of night. Everything seemed to whirl around her. The very ground beneath her feet threatened to give way, and she had to summon all her strength to find refuge under a tree, which reached, she fell prostrate to the ground. For the first time in her life she lost consciousness, and alone at the late hours of the night the poor child lay helpless and forsaken. But youth and a strong constitution asserted themselves, and gradually consciousness returned unaided. Around her were the weird shadows of the forest trees, and above the stars had appeared. She glanced from heaven to earth, and the beauty of the night was reflected in her glorious eyes. • But she saw it not, the stars had no lustre for her, the forest loneliness no fear. The cry of despair was in her heart, and this was all she knew. She raised herself into a sitting position and leaned against the trunk of a tree. She gazed at her right hand, and burning tears fell upon it, for still it held the faded wreath with which she would have adorned the Prince. But the wreath was now faded in truth, for the love, the faith, the hope that had clung to it so long were dead for evermore. And as she gazed the pain in her heart grew deeper and deeper until the tears dried in her eyes, and the very blood seemed to freeze in her veins.

She thought of those cruel words the Maharani of Dinajpore had spoken, she felt their poison, still they crushed her not, but filled her heart once more with strength. She pressed her teeth into her beautiful lips, and then, as if killing the last thing that was dear to her on earth, she unstrung the wreath and took the faded flowers in her hand, crushed them with her strong fingers and flung them to the ground. Then she rose and trampled them under foot. Ah, strong and much tried soul, what did you not suffer that moment as crushed at your feet lay the fairest flowers of your heart, a life's great love, and faith, and hope ! She stood and stared on them with lips firmly pressed and vacant gaze. They must have suffered as this maiden did, who would know all she felt that moment.

Now the bitterness gave way to tears, her pale lips trembled with the pain of despair, and throwing her fair form down on the lost hope of her life, she writhed like one in pain and wept like a child and cried out,

"O Rajkumar, Rajkumar, behold your work !"

And then she struck her chest with her clenched fist and like one maddened called out aloud,

"Away with foolish fancies, I want revenge, O God, revenge, revenge !"

She shuddered at the sound of her own voice and remained speechless, motionless,

lifeless, until the still woods echoed back the cry, "Revenge, O God, revenge, revenge!"

CHAPTER XI.

As she lay prostrate on the ground she felt the touch of a hand. Startled she rose. "Who are you?" asked her angry voice.

"I am a Mussalman."

It took a girl of Shakti's courage not to be frightened at that advanced hour of the night, faced by a stranger in the woods alone, and this stranger a Mussalman, upon whom a Hindu in those days looked with special abhorrence. But she had a strong heart, this storm-tossed Hindu maiden, and the force of circumstances had trained her to rely upon herself. She was not alarmed at the sight of the stranger, but vexed at the thought that a Mussalman dared to put his hand on her. She recoiled from his touch and harshly said, "Wretch, forbear, how dare you to touch me?"

The man wore the Fakir's garb of white and a string of beads around his neck. "I thought you had fainted," he answered gently.

"And if I had fainted," came Shakti's proud reply, "what would that be to you, why should you touch me?"

The stranger seated himself at the foot of a tree. He unwound his turban and put

it together again. That done he replied calmly.

"There is but one Creator, and all men are fashioned of one clay,—children of one Father all, you and I and all that lives. Why do you hold yourself so proudly aloof?"

"Stand aside, you are a man, I am a woman. You are a Mohamedan, I am a Hindu. You are of a low race, your creed is low,—my race, my religion are the loftiest on earth. The same God may have fashioned you and me, but not in the same mould. Between you and me there can be no equality."

The man laughed. Irony sounded forth from his voice as he spoke. "Has the great God made different laws for each? There is but one Eternal Consciousness that governs rich and poor alike and knows neither Hindu nor Mussalmian. Omnipotent justice governs all, and before the Creator no difference exists."

How strangely his words sounded, were they not the same that she herself had uttered one hour ago? They seemed like an echo of the curse she had spoken with her own lips. Who was this mysterious intruder, who seemed to read her very heart? At first she had taken him for one of those itinerant impostors who swarm the highroads of India and claim to be holy men, but now she thought him to be one of those few who really attain to enlightenment. His words

disconcerted her. She mused a while and then replied,

"If that be true, O Sage, then whence have we this sense of inequality?"

"Because of ignorance, illusion."

"And why all this illusion? If the Creator be omnipotent, why does He not remove this ignorance from suffering mankind?"

"For the preservation of His creation, for the accomplishment of His designs, illusion must exist. The world would cease to be, were it removed."

"Then the Creator wills man's suffering? This seems like cruelty, why then speak of a great mercy?"

"Patience, the Creator is all in all. Both cruelty and mercy are of His essence. Live in accordance with the Law and mercy will be yours, oppose it, and your lot is woe."

Shakti could not grasp all the stranger said. The pain in her heart burned too deeply still, and following the impulse that moved her, she thought aloud rather than spoke when she exclaimed,

"Wills the Creator vengeance too? If He is all in all, why is vengeance such a deadly sin?"

"If it were so very sinful, why gave the Eternal this feeling to mankind? Were there no retribution for injustice done, the Creator himself would cease to be just. Revenge is the retribution of injustice."

"Revenge, O God, revenge!" The girl uttered these words involuntarily. "It is

revenge I want, but knows this world a retribution for faithlessness, for broken hearts?"

"The shedding of blood, the shedding of blood! May God help you," said the Fakir in a deep voice, as if uttering a prophecy.

Shakti's noble nature revolted. The gory picture the Mussalman held up before her made her shudder. "No," she called out in lofty indignation, "I do not want his death, I want his heart, his love, this alone would answer. I want to see the day when Ganesh Dev will be ready to sacrifice all for me,—mother, state, family and wealth. I want to see him ready to face hell for my sake. This is the vengeance I desire, naught else would satisfy me."

The Mussálman laughed. "The woman who might trample under foot the hearts of a hundred men, who might have Emperors at her feet, pleads humbly for this lowly boon."

And now again those oft-repeated words. Astrologers with one accord predicted a great destiny for Shakti. In her horoscope it was written that in her eighteenth year the daughter of Bonawari Lal would become a great Queen. Her father doubted not that this would be fulfilled and therefore had left her unmarried so long. Until now Shakti had herself believed it, but this night had shattered her faith. Therefore when once more she heard the same predi-

tions, her heart grew angry and bitterly she said,—

“Enough of this, I want to hear no more. Those mocking words do not befit a holy man. The woman who failed to win the heart of him she loves, will never triumph over hundreds.”

“I do not mock. The great God gave you life that you should mete out joy and sorrow to many.”

Shakti laughed, but her laughter rang with despair. “I once thought,” she said coldly, “that I was destined for great things, but to-night I see how vain have been my thoughts. A humble maiden I, how could I be a queen?”

“How did Matsyagandha become a queen?” She was surprised to hear him express so much knowledge of ancient Hindu lore, and her faith in him grew stronger. But he continued “The eye of my spirit has been opened, and I see this land of Bengal from end to end, and I see reigning as its Queen, Shaktimoi, Empress of Bengal.”

The fakir spoke as one who knew, and in her eagerness she forgot her sorrow. “Shaktimoi, Queen of Bengal? Oh, Fakir, no, such hopes I may not harbour. The hope I had soared far less high than that, and even it has seen its doom to-day.”

“It was destroyed but to give way to greater destiny. The stars are calling you to greater things than give your life to com-

• Matsyagandha is one of the characters in the Mahabharata.

mon love. The Sultan's son has seen and learned to love you, he wants that you should be his Queen. I am a messenger from him to you."

So far Shakti had not understood the stranger. Her mind was so engrossed with the thought of Ganesh Dev, that it did not occur to her he could have meant another, and she feared to trust his prophecy. But now that she saw he meant another, she mistrusted him no longer. She suddenly saw a kingdom at her feet, she saw herself no longer the despised daughter of Bonawari Lal. slighted by the Raja of Dinajpore and insulted by his mother, but the ruler of the destinies of those who would cast her adrift. And the thought of this filled her with greater emotion than that of being an empress. Two passions had reigned in Shakti's heart since early days—her great love for the Prince and her desire for high estate, and she had nourished these two dreams with her heart's blood. One of these boons was cruelly snatched from her forever. Ganesh Dev was hers no more, she had lost him without hope. But the hand of power stretched out to her in welcome greeting; should she accept it or refuse? She spoke not at once, but thought deeply and at last replied.

"He is a Mussalman, I am a Hindu."

"That is your mind's delusion. God is one, and Hindu and Mussalman alike worship Him, but under different names and

in a different form. To avoid another on that account is a great sin, a want of true religion."

Shakti heard him not, she thought still of the man she loved. What was high estate, what power without him? And the voice came from her heart when the maiden softly spoke,

"Ganesh Dev, I want him."

"He will never be yours."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"You know it?"

"Ganesh Dev will never marry you. Now choose. An empire awaits you. Will you be the Sultana, the Empress of all Bengal, or———."

He could not finish. The girl had risen to depart and interrupted him. "That is enough. I now must go. To-morrow I will give you my answer."

CHAPTER XII.

The girl was on the forest path alone, around her reigned dread terrors. From the vast gloom of space weird shadows seemed to spring upon her, seemed to pursue her and with soundless mocking laughter repeat those words of destiny.

"He will never be yours, never, never!"

And Shakti's strong heart shuddered, she hastened on with quickened step. Through

the branches shone a distant light, and towards it she bent her way.

At the edge of the forest stood a temple, old and crumbling, dedicated to Kali, the goddess. She had reached it now and finding the door unlocked entered the building. But there was no image in this room, the dim lamp-light revealed only the form of a woman seated on a deer-skin. She wore the ascetic garb, and her face was calm and benignant. She was the priestess of the temple. She saw Shakti and spoke to her in tender reproach.

"Child, I have been anxious on your account. Where have you been so late? I did not know you were so unconventional, or I might not have kept you here."

Shakti's father had died at this temple and before passing away left Shakti in the priestess' care. The girl took the reproof calmly and made no attempt to defend herself. "The Rajkumar was here," was all she replied.

The priestess understood the cause of her delay and guessed who was the Rajkumar. Still she asked, --

"Who is the Rajkumar?"
"A friend of my childhood, Ganesh Dev, the present Rajah of Dinajpore."

"Then Surya Dev is dead?"
Shakti replied in the affirmative, and the priestess murmured, "Peace be unto him, Om," and she continued her meditation.

"Did you know him, mother?" asked Shakti interrupting her reverie.

The priestess remained silent still, but later replied, "Child, you are now a woman. Even though the Prince was your playmate in your childhood, it is not fitting that you should meet him now."

"We are married," came the girl's reply.

"Married!" exclaimed the priestess, "your father did not tell me you were married."

"My father knew it not, ours was a Gandharva-Marriage."* And now Shakti related the little scene of her childhood, when she had married the Prince at play in the garden by the lake. The priestess smiled compassionately. "Poor child," she said, "who would blame you for your fancy, for what is the world but a play-ground? Our Lord Krishna† was himself at play, and you are but a child, simple and innocent, as yet untouched by the world and all its woe. Who would then be surprised that you should take a childhood's play in earnest? But what says the Prince to all this? Would he take the bride he won in boyish merriment as the consort of his life?"

Unfortunate child, how lonely she felt. Was there then no one who understood her? Even the priestess doubted that the Prince was hers, and yet she knew nothing of this evening's occurrence! Was there then no

* One of the eight forms of marriage in India. The rite is simple, the contracting parties only throw a wreath around each other's neck. It is always a secret marriage. It is, however, not now recognised.

† The Indian Christ.

hope, no one to take her to be Ganesh Dev's wife, would all re-echo those cruel words, "He will never be yours,—never, never!" These words haunted the unfortunate girl and almost maddened her. Struck by the fierce blast of despair, the tenderer feelings of her nature became frozen, and boldly she exclaimed, "If he accepts me not as his wife, I shall bring ruin upon him."

Only a while ago she had shuddered to hear these words from the lips of the Fakir, but now she had uttered them herself and flinched not in doing so. She remained silent for a while to subdue the passion that raged within. Then she spoke again, and now she was calm.

†"Devi mother, I will tell you all. I have been rejected and abandoned. My heart now desires naught but revenge. I want Ganesh Dev, I want to see him at my feet. And if I gain him not, I shall—"

"Peace, child, peace. The desire for vengeance fits not woman. The world, my child, was not created to grant all the desires that mortals crave. Can you move the earth with a touch of your hand? Did Providence give you a pledge ere you were born that all obstructions should be removed from your path, that the rose of life should have no thorn for you? Your anger, child, is vain. The marriage of a child-hood's play binds not the Prince to you for life. And they who suffer, suffer of themselves,

† Reverend Mother.

man's *karma* brings him woe or joy. You may appear to him a beggar, and has a beggar any rights? Before heaven he has wronged you not. If you would but understand it, you are making an unjust claim upon him."

"An unjust claim?" Shakti reiterated these words and threw back her head in proud defiance as she did so. "I have the highest claim on him, mine is the claim of love, of faith, of the heart. It is a sin to turn a beggar from the door when he relies on faith upon the giver's kindness. How far greater then is not the sin when one rejects the maiden who gave him her heart, her soul? And, mother, though you say I know not right and wrong as the world knows it, I know the dictates of the heart, I know the voice of God to which my soul responds, I know justice from sin in the eye of the Eternal. And he who broke his faith with me, sinned against the highest law, the purest creed the gods yet gave to man, the religion of the heart, the highest duty due to love."

"My child, you reason wrongly. High is the creed the young heart dictates, I gainsay it not. But know my child, that it is limited; for the love of two souls is all it encompasses. And if your love stands alone, if it is not reciprocated by him on whom it falls, your law is powerless, your theory gone. True, when two love and one breaks faith, the pure creed of the heart, faith, duty—

these are violated. I may go further still. If a man inspires false hopes in a woman by pretentious acts, even then her sorrow falls upon him, he is a faithless man. But, my child, let not your fancies carry you too far. Imagine not that he is tied to you by a mere childish play. One-sided love can make no claim, it becomes a humble petitioner for favour. If the demand is just, the claim is also just, but when one makes an unjust claim, he must not lament when refused."

"If this love was mine alone, why did he daily act as if he loved me? Why did he put the garland round my neck and make me his queen?"

"That was a playful act. Put not a man's responsibility into a deed a boy so lightly did."

"Was I not also young those days? Still I have loved him and I love him now, and yet his oath must be all a childhood's play?"

"Listen, be calm, my child. I doubt not that your aspirations are noble. But remember love is the sentiment of youth, especially in man. You have not met since childhood, his love for you had not a chance to grow, nor did he choose you for his wife as bridegroom chooses. So he has wronged you not, either before the world or in the heart. If your mind were calm you would soon see this."

"No, mother, there you are wrong. Even today each word, each glance revealed his hidden love. But he is weak, he is a coward,

he fears his mother's anger and therefore discarded the maiden of his heart. He heeds false accusations. 'Bonwari Lal's sister has disgraced her race ?' Oh, evil woman, your words are false ! And if a God there be, the day will come when your offspring shall kneel at the feet of the daughter of Bonowari Lal, and you yourself will be humbled. This is my prophecy, my curse ; God's hand be on you, woman, for the evil you have wrought."

CHAPTER XIII.

Shakti's excitement had carried her beyond herself, but now she stood silent. Her heart beat faster than it should beat, and she paused to breathe. The priestess too was silent, but presently she spoke.

"Blame not the fates too much, my child, but see the hand of God behind the Law. He gives us sorrow for our good. And if the Prince loves you and still rejects, he heeds the voice of conscience and of duty. He sacrificed his own life's happiness with yours. If he abandoned you while loving you, can life have joy for him hereafter? Seek not to wreak dread vengeance on the man, but honour him, pray for his weal. What course did the divine Ram Chandra take? Had Ganesh married you, he feared he would bring shame upon his race, therefore he gave you up, and he chose wisely."

"Yes I should pray, for he chose wisely!" Shakti laughed in scorn as she spoke, "what greater duty has a man than that of love? Ram Chandra gave no sign of greatness when he banished Sita from his court. His people honoured him for that, but woman knows what Sita must have suffered and cannot call his action noble. That deed of his, the great injustice of that act has stained his name, however posterity may applaud him.

"If Sita Devi was his wife, she was his subject also. He cast her off, knowing that she was pure, he feared his people's displeasure, failed in his duty as a king, as a just man and a husband, he sinned against both men and God."

"But--"

"No, mother, there can be no 'but.' The Prince through fear of evil calumny refuses her who gave her heart to him, whose wedded husband he is even now. Love, life, devotion, soul—my all, I gave him, and these he cast ruthlessly to the winds. And you say he sins not against his conscience? He sins against himself and me. And I should honour him? He is a coward, is unmanly, unjust, sinful! One of my race, they say, disgraced her name,—my aunt. She has gone hence, and heaven itself is purer for her presence. False, false, false."

The sound of Shakti's angry voice seemed to desecrate the nightly stillness, but now

once more the girl was silent. But the **Yogini* spoke as calmly as before.

"Peace, child, for God alone knows the whole truth. Behold I am she, whom they have cursed, your aunt, and I am still on earth. Whether I shall find my place in heaven I know not, but as yet I have not found a corner even in hell."

Shakti became amazed and looked at the woman in silent wonder.

"Listen, my child," continued the *Yogini*, "hear my sad tale and learn a lesson from it. I once thought as now you think, that the heart's law is the highest, the only law in fact. The idol of my soul was like a God to me. Whatever God's world holds of beauty, truth, goodness and purity, I wove into his name and worshipped him. His word was truth to me, his deeds pure righteousness. He stood aloof from other men, I thought him all divine, no evil taint could touch him. But alas, I saw my idol crumble at my feet, my faith had been in vain. If the great God himself would come in human form and live on earth, he would have to conform to its conditions. Learn to regulate the law of the heart by the laws of the world, and its purity and nobility is preserved ; but defy the laws that man has made, and the law that governs your heart can never assert itself."

"But it is the woman alone, the pure, the loving, the simple-hearted who suffers, *who

* Female devotee.

loses joy and peace. But they who sin, the demigods of this earth, make a pastime of life by destroying the happiness of the innocent who trusted them. I now see what has wrought your doom. As Ganesh did unto me, so did his father unto you. And still you pray for him!"

Shakti had abruptly interrupted her aunt, she could no longer listen in silence. And now she continued as before. "Revenge, I say not once but thousand-fold. Oh God, is then Thy justice dead? Thou hast created woman as she is, tender and trusting, why? Only that man should trample on her, Thy weaker creature?"

"Reprehend not thy Creator, child. For know that they He dooms to suffer are by his mercy chosen. The animal resorts to force when tyranny attempts to fetter it. But man was made for higher aims. It is divine indeed to suffer tyranny and still to bless. Pray for the happiness of him who caused you woe, and the divinity in you will then assert itself. Violence is earth's inheritance, but love leads to the gods, it is a heavenly boon. Its strength is great, immeasurable. It bears the woes of others gladly, and sorrow cannot bear it down. This is the great Creator's boon to man. He granted him this priceless blessing."

"Let them forbear who find happiness in forbearance. Oppression and injustice are unbearable to me."

"Child, be calm, revenge is His, the great

God will avenge. Weak mortals cannot judge good and evil, right and wrong. A woman's nature is devotion, and true love knows not vengeance. Child, you have suffered much, the pain of unrequited love burns deeply in your heart. If you would gain peace, conquer the cry for vengeance in your soul and try to bless where evil has been meted out to you. Strive to obtain this peace, you will require nought else."

"If God had meant all this for me, he would have made my nature so that I could grasp it. Lo the difference in the flower and thorn, and yet both are the children of one plant, both needed for the same design to make complete the life of the one parent tree. One God created both, and his plans are worked out by good and evil. He whom the world calls good, opposes sin by piety and virtue, and he whom men call bad opposes evil deeds by force, but violence or virtue, both claim one goal, both are the common features of one race, and to fulfil God's purpose both must be. When you were born the stars prepared your path that you might conquer sin by righteousness and noble deeds. But I was born to suppress sin by sin itself. I do not know what in long ages of the past my deeds have been, that the Creator should bestow on me a fate so fatal, so unfortunate, but I must carry out His purpose. I want revenge If he becomes my own, then are Ganesh Dev's

evil deeds forgotten and condoned. If not, then by the worship of God's thunderbolt as embodied in Kali—”

“Child, Kali is not the satisfier of revengeful spirits,” the priestess interrupted, “but the avenging goddess of all evil done. If you worship the gods to obtain vengeance, your creed is fiendish. The *Shastras* do not teach revenge. The Hindu religion is divine.”

“I cannot follow any faith that considers not the punishment of injustice divine. I now go to the goddess, and if she grants me all my heart's desires then will the Hindu faith be mine, if not, I'll cast it from me.”

CHAPTER XIV.

Shakti did not wait for a reply, she left the room. At the back of the building, partitioned off by a broken brick wall, was the sanctuary that held the image of Kali, the dread goddess. Walking through the garden path alone, she reached the door which was not bolted from within and yielded to her touch. It was the dead of night, the moon had set ere this, and the starlit sky above sent a faint glimmer through the door, and gave just light enough to make the darkness visible. Gruesome terrors seemed to slumber here and now roused into action.

And Shakti stood with eyes transfixed

before the starlit, awful face of Kali. The red tongue of the image seemed to writhe for vengeance. The weird wreath of skulls around her neck appeared to dance and mock, their dead mouths laughing and the hollow sockets of their eyes alive with hate and wrath and all the low propensities of nature. The heads stared at her dripping with gore. And now it seemed that they took skeleton forms and dropped from Kali's neck and danced around her shrieking, "Vengeance, vengeance," while anon she heard the goddess call for blood.

The maiden stood like one possessed, half stupified, unconscious, the echo of these words ran through her soul, she knew no more the world in which she lived, but only knew the force that moved her heart and madly she called out, "Revenge, revenge, I want revenge."

And scarcely had her voice melted away, scarcely the gruesome silence reappeared, when lo, another voice was ringing through the ghostly stillness. Her heart stood still, she dared not move, but listened.

"Then be it so. Your wish shall be fulfilled. Be you the instrument to bring the destruction on him."

With trembling lips and eyes dilated, stood Shakti, cold fright sent shudders through her frame, but she saw naught save the grim image motionless, inert. Yet as she stared she thought the red tongue quivered, and the dreadful eyes glowed

flames as if to shatter her last doubts. The strong girl crushed the fear back to her heart and cried, "Oh goddess, I desire revenge, but not his blood, nor yet his death. All that I loved on earth has now been taken. I have but one desire remaining. I want his love; grant me this boon, that he be mine."

Again the same strange voice replied, "He will never be yours,—never, never."

And now the hot blood coursed like fire through her veins, the Rajpoot warrior soul of her strong race broke forth, and Shakti spoke again, and as she spoke there was not fear, but bold defiance ringing through her voice. "Who art thou? Speak, for this is not the goddess' voice."

From behind the image came a man. Her eyes were now accustomed to the partial darkness, and she scanned him closely. He was a devotee of Kali of the Kapali* sect. His garment was of reddish hue, his hair was wreathed with crimson hibicus, red sandal marks were bright upon his brow and round his neck that fearful garland of human skulls. But Shakti feared him not, she gazed at him awhile and then she spoke. "Who art thou?" she repeated.

"I am the servant of the goddess and have come hither at her bidding. I have a message to deliver, and I speak at her command. I see a black cloud hovering to

* A fearful sect who propitiated Kali with terrible deeds. It is now nearly extinct.

obscure the bright sky of your destiny. A demon casts a shadow on the bright moon of your future. Unless you are delivered from his grasp, your fate bodes ill. If you desire your own well-being, if but a spark of Kali's spirit moves your soul, then worship now the goddess with fixed purpose, pray her for the destruction of the man to whom your heart clings foolishly. But if you wish but to obtain his favour, the favour of a man who broke your heart, lacerated the woman's tenderer impulse and left her bleeding on the ground, then go your way. Insult not the great goddess by pouring foolish prayers out to her, then wend your way to him, fall at his feet and plead, and if he gives not love, accept then his contempt. He may not take you as his wife, but you may be his —"

"Stop, say no more." The girl's pride shone from her lofty brow, she thought of the day's insult, and it stung her deeply, "Who are you,—a Sanyasi * or a demon? I do not want him now, my heart revolts against the thought."

"And if you did, you would not get him. He will never be yours, he will never take you for his lawful wife. Now answer me, what will you be, the slave of the destroyer of your soul—"

"Or will you be my Queen?" This was another voice, it sounded low and gentle, and from behind the image stepped a

* A male devotee.

youth. The night had meanwhile passed, the early dawn was breaking, and by the first grey light Shakti now recognised the Sultan's son, Gaias-ud-din. The prince approached and took her hand in his.

"Now tell me, beautiful one, will you become the Queen of all Bengal? My kingdom and my wealth are vain without you."

She was abashed, she hesitated. She stood upon a cross-road; on one side love, honour, power beckoned, while on the other, scorn, degradation, insult grimly stood. One man was ready to give all for her, the other for whom she would gladly give her life, was gone from her for ever, beyond hope. She felt like the young deer chased to the sea by hunters. Her woman's heart rebelled, and yet pale lips replied, "Jahanpana†, I will be yours."

And then the Prince took from his neck a diamond chain, placed on her white throat and smiled. But lo, the maiden's dauntless heart grew weak, her face turned deadly white, and her closed lips quivered like the wind-blown petals of a lily.

CHAPTER XV.

The priestess noticed not that Shakti left her, but still pursuing the course of her thought, continued, "The suppression of sin by sin, the accomplishment of right by

† Protector of the world.

wrong is not the teaching of the gods. The burden of sin is but increased thereby, and evil cannot be diminished by evil, this is pure Shastric teaching." Then she became aware that she was alone and relapsed into silence. But her thoughts were anxious. The door of the room was open, and a gust of wind extinguished the flame of the little oil-lamp. She looked out through the open door, and she saw the starlit sky stretching its mighty canopy above. She looked northward, and back of yonder trees the Seven Sages (the northern constellation) shone in proud splendour, the pale light of the Polar Star, ever fixed in its old place, pointing the way. And the *Yogini* gazed and marvelled. God's mighty handiwork revealed itself like a great volume of mysterious lore. And her religious soul, by meditation trained, read many a wondrous message in those stars and felt itself up-lifted to the gods.

"Oh God of gods", she spoke, "Lord of the Universe, with meek and reverent heart let me behold thy mighty work. How weak we are, who tread this dust-clad star! Have we then no control over our deeds, our passions and our fate? Are we like, wind-tossed reeds, mere puppets in thy hand, to come and go like weary pilgrims, to act or cease to act, to cry or to be still according to Thy will? Good and evil, joy and sorrow, fortune and poverty, have they all but one end, one aim,—the pre-

servation of Thy creation through diversity ? And if they have no purpose but this one, then why oh Lord, hast Thou created, why the deed and the doer ? Then why such punishments and such rewards that seem all so disproportionate to man's weak will and for the deeds he does, whether they be good or evil ? Our actions are like the expanding air. We may not mean them to be this or that, but once set in motion they expand, they grow on us and often overpower us ; we never know where what we do may end. A father's sins fall on his children ; then for the sin of one must others suffer ? Why must this innocent girl suffer for the sin I did ? Is this Thy will, or is it my own blindness that fails to see Thy purpose behind it ? Perhaps by this she works out her own destiny ; perhaps the chain that binds her to me was wrought by fate itself, that she be purified of deeds done in the past."

Now her thoughts ceased, she closed her eyes and sat absorbed in abstract meditation. The light of a thousand stars flooded her soul, and in that light the profound mystery of God's creation was revealed. A peaceful joy filled her sad heart, and now again she spoke.

"Oh God, I see, I feel the truth. In Thy creation naught is purposeless. From great intelligences to the atom, all has its aim, its purpose, all its own sphere of action. There is nothing either great or small be-

fore Thee. Thou art in the slightest grain of dust and in the worlds that roll through space. The spark that dwells within the dust grows and expands as ages pass, until a higher form of life is reached. Unto the utmost ends of all that is, Thy being rules. All existence is by progress moved, and the end of being is the blending into the Universal Consciousness. From the small atom to the spiritual soul, all moves and whirls around restlessly in the great *Sansara*-wheel towards its eternal goal. Through many births we pass and many deaths, thus through a thousand lives to find our peace, to work our own salvation and the purpose of the world. And in this voyage over the sea of being, sin and piety, passion and renunciation, joy and sorrow—all do their work to lead the barge into the distant harbour. Ah, thousandfold Thy ways, oh great Creator, to lead Thy pilgrims over the sea of life, but each individual is chooser of the vessel by which he braves the wave. Our sight is limited, we see but a small range, therefore our fear of storm and danger. But the Eternal Consciousness is pilot at each helm, and he who once knows Thee is safe. Thou causest righteousness to spring from sin, renunciation from desire. But as the sunlight peeps through threatening clouds, so shines Thy mercy through the thunderbolts of fate. Thy glory is unmeasurable, Thy power endless. Only he to whom

Thou givest understanding can conceive
Thee dimly. Oh Lord, why hast Thou
kept me in this world ? Since Thou hast
blest this life of mine with mercy from Thy
hand, tell me oh Lord of Hosts, what task
of mine remains still incomplete ?”

The *Yogini*’s meditation was interrupted.
She heard the sound of horse’s hoofs, and
the gray morning-light revealed the figure
of a turbaned Mussulman on horseback near
the door.

“Salutation unto you, mother,” said the
rider. “Will you come outside ? I have
come to announce to you the favour of the
Badshah.^{*}” The *Matajī* went to the door
and at a distance saw beneath a tree a
richly decorated palanquin, near which
stood officers and servants. She was sur-
prised to see all this and asked the rider
at the threshhold for an explanation. “Why
is that palanquin there ?” she said.

“To take our *Begum*,[†]” said the Mussal-
man. “Our lord, the *Sultan*, desires to
marry the beautiful maiden that resides
with you. Be good enough to bring her
here.”

The priestess’ usual calm deserted her,
and angrily she said, “Does not the Badshah
know she is a Hindu ? There can be no
union between her and him.”

“A Mussalman may wed a Hindu
maiden,” replied the rider, “our faith is

* Emperor.

† Holy Mother.

‡ Queen.

noble. The Prophet's religion is the religion of the world. Unto the Moslem faith all may be won."

"But why should she abandon her own faith?"

The man laughed and replied, "No woman ever was so foolish as not to give her creed to wed the Sultan. All I ask is that you will bring the maiden here. The rest will be arranged in time."

"That cannot be," was the *Yogini*'s firm reply, "her father left her in my charge, I yield the girl to no one."

"You disobey the Badshah's orders? If you refuse to give the girl, I shall enter the temple."

"It is a ruler's duty to protect his subjects, not to tyrannize. I shall refuse to give her up. Go, tell your Badshah that."

"If you value your own welfare, give up the girl, or I arrest you as a rebel," and with these words the officer alighted. the priestess fled and darted towards the room where Kali's image stood.

As she approached, Shakti came from the shrine, and with her was a youth who clasped her hand in his. The *Sanyasini* could not trust her eyes, she stood stupefied. "Shakti, who is this man?" she firmly asked.

"The Crown-prince, Gaias-ud-din, my husband."

Amazement overpowered her, she stood rooted to the spot. Meanwhile the Prince

and Shakti went towards the woods and disappeared.

* * * *

The sun was rising. The priestess stood with head erect and gazed upon the fiery orb of light which slowly rose upon the eastern sky. Once more her soul spoke forth, "Oh Lord of Hosts, I comprehend the purpose of my life. I am to free my country from this yoke of despotism and oppression. Nor is it mine alone, this task. She too is chosen as thy instrument, this girl. Thou callest both, oh Will Divine, one by desire, the other by renunciation. Oh Thou Eternal, Thou art the Creator, the creation Thou; Thou art knowledge, Thou illusion; Thou art the stimulator and the repressor. Thou art Karma, Thou its fruit. Enlighten my mind, oh All-powerful One with Thy wisdom, give me strength to fulfil Thy design. Om!"

CHAPTER XVI.

It was spring. The young year made the woods resound with song; fanned by soft breezes swayed the branches, and the fragrance of the mango-buds filled the soft air. Today the woods were still more merry, for maidens were assembled here to celebrate the year's first festival. Young, beautiful and gay, themselves the flowers of the spring of life, they made the woodland ring with

laughter. They were the ladies of the Court of Dinajpore, who had accompanied the Prince to Pandua for the tournament, the Maharaja having his own residence at the Capital.

Our India is the land of legends, each tree has its own tale. The fragrance of the mango-blossom is one of the seven arrows of the Hindu Cupid, and under the Kadamba's cooling branches Krishna wooed Radhika. The Asoka tree cannot bring forth its bloom unless touched by a maiden's feet. But alas for you, poor Asoka tree, you have in this unromantic age to produce your blossoms unaided. In this festival you were left untouched, the legend notwithstanding. Young life wants its own merriment, and the guava tree was more inviting. Its young branches quivered with delight under a pair of dainty crimson-tinted feet, for a frolicsome girl had mounted it and dexterously climbed from branch to branch. A number of her companions stood around the tree, some straining their necks and gazing at her in admiration, while others, incited to bravery by her daring, tried to follow in her footsteps. But they seemed to lack her ability for climbing, for every attempt proved a failure, and they found themselves back on the lap of mother earth before they knew it, to the great merriment of the onlookers. But there were those amongst them whose strict sense of decorum made them feel shocked at this tomboy's

unbecoming behaviour, and they did not hesitate to express their disapproval. They exhorted the bold climber to come down in tones mixed with reproach and gentle entreaty. But the adventuress only received new impetus therefrom and aspired to more and bolder deeds of heroism. She laughed and shook down a shower of fruit upon their heads.

From another tree a rain of plums fell down to earth. Its boughs were low, and one of the cheerful crowd shook it while standing. The plum-tree was not blessed with the touch of maiden's feet, a pair of tender hands sufficed to make it yield its treasure, which fell in profusion unending, like *Draupadi's rice. Nor was the scattered spoil left long on the ground, pretty hands gathered it with eagerness while merry voices rang.

To some, however, this pastime seemed unromantic. They were those, who in the bloom of young womanhood, were still in their years of courtship, which in India begins after marriage. They gathered flowers to be woven into wreaths and taken home for one whom even in this hour of merrymaking they could not banish from their thoughts. Still others were tempted by neither fruit nor flowers. They were moved perhaps by the thoughts of the prey they had left at home, enslaved by the beauty of their black eyes and caught in the meshes

* A story in the Mahabharat. Krishna blessed Draupadi and granted her prayer and after that her rice vessel was never empty.

of their youthful charms, and following their natural propensity sat down by the lake and baited fish,

Two girls were seated apart on a stone slab in the mango-grove. They wove their flowers into ornaments and whispered softly, telling each other of those tender secrets that stir the heart in youth. Suddenly from the distance came the sound of a sweet voice, which made the mango-grove vibrate with song. It was Rangini who sang, a girl in the bloom of youth. She was married to the Court poet, a sentimental old man more than twice her age, who claimed to be ever young at heart and poured out his love for his young wife in foolish, jovial verse. It was one of these silly little love-songs that she was gaily singing as she came along.

This interrupted the weaving of flowers, the girls looked up eagerly, and one exclaimed, "There comes that dear, old, stupid Rangini." And then she came in sight, Rangini Sundari, still singing she approached the mango-grove.

"Go along", laughed Kusum who was one of the two seated under the mango trees, "we don't want to hear your old husband's love songs."

Rangini coming closer answered gaily back, "Very well, my dear, then you be my young husband." Then she caressed Kusum's face and continued her song, .

"Oh moonfaced maiden hear my tale,
I am like clay in your white hands. .

Leave me, and oh, my lips turn pale,
 You are my wealth, you are my lands,
 My silk and shawls. And night and day
 My heart pines for you. Oft I fear
 Some one may snatch my love away,
 What shall I do when you're not near ?
 You are my pudding, you my rice,
 My cloak, my cooling drink, my grain,
 My betel leaf, sweet-meat and spice,
 And my umbrella in the rain.
 You are the Veda's ancient lore
 You my religious rite.
 The dawn that comes the day before,
 My sacrifice, my light.
 You keep me bound where'er I go,
 You chastise evil with your broom.
 Your smile rids me of all my woe,
 You are my bliss, you are my doom."

"Your old husband knows how to make love certainly," laughed Kamini, the other one of the two, who listened to Rangini's song.

"Better than your young husband. I have never heard a single witty word from his lips. If I had such a husband, I would renounce the world and go into exile."

"Kamini's husband is very sly," said Kusum, "he does all his love-making on the quiet. Do sing something else."

"Would you like to hear the answer to that song?" asked Rangini. "As soon as he sang it, I gave him tit for tat."

"Oh, then you have become a poet as well as your husband & exclaimed Kamini.

"As you please, my lady," retorted Rangini quickly, and now she sang again, this time a song of her own manufacture.

"Oh my dear life !
 You are my household care,
 My cooking pot, my paring knife,
 Millstone and earthen-ware.
 My curry-stone and frying pan,
 My ornaments and jewelled fan,
 My ladle, fork and kitchen broom,
 My money bag and weaving-loom.
 You are my Krishna's flute and song,
 And your wife's quarrel all day long."

Now Nirupama came quietly upon them and called out as she came,

"Rangini does sing beautifully." Seeing her, the girls rose to their feet and saluted her.

"Her music sounds like Krishna's flute," added Kamini.

"You must sing this song to the Rajkumar today," exclaimed Nirupama. Ganesh Dev was now Raja, but Nirupama called him Rajkumar still through force of habit.

"No, dear, why should I sing?" said Rangini, "you ought to welcome him with song today. It is for you to give him this reward as winner of tournament."

Nirupama smiled, her young heart filled with joy and pride, and shyly she replied, "You girls must welcome him with song, and I will garland him with flowers."

"Let us wreath you first," called out Kusum, "then you may take the garland from your neck and wreath your husband." And then they decked the Princess with flowers, while Kusum and Kamini sang the words of Krishna, the great mythological lover.

"Ah thou my soul, friend of my heart,
Without thee life is sad and cold."

'To which Nirupama, impersonating Radhika, replied,

"Sweet are thy words, mellow thy art,
My cunning Krishna. Ah behold
Fair Chandrabali's laughing eyes,
While the sad Radha weeps and sighs."

Kusum and Kamini replying,

"Ah speak not thus, thy own heart knows,
My Radha, that thy fears are vain.
Behold my heart, like ocean flows
My love. Why cause such bitter pain ?
Ah, that thy lotus feet might be
Two vessels on these silver waves
Of love, which draws my soul to thee,
My heart had found all that it craves."

When the song was finished Nirupama suddenly said,

"This garland will not do. I must make one myself and give it to him. There are flowers in abundance, let me string them into a wreath." And seating herself on the slab she began to weave her garland. A shadow crossed her fair young face, the memory of a day long passed flashed over her mind. She thought of the day when Ganesh Dev took the garland she had woven and placed it on the neck of Shakti. She looked around as if she felt her near, but seeing Shakti not, sighed happily relieved and went on with her task. Then from the distance came the mellow sound of flute-notes. The maidens listened.

"Hark", said Kamini, "it is the same old tune. It brings the days of childhood back,

I have not heard it since. Do you remember, *Bourani, the happy days at Dinajpore, do you recall the time when in the garden by lake Mohipal, we once played "Raja and Rani?"

Did she remember? Ah, poor Nirupama! She remembered all too well, and to this day the thought of it darkened her happiness. She did not raise her eyes while her friend spoke, but softly sighing said, "How is it that the Rajkumar has not yet come? The tournament is over by this time. Can it be he who plays the flute?"

Yes, it was the Rajkumar who played the flute. For while the maidens frolicked in the woods, weaving their wreaths to welcome him, Ganesh Dev sat with Shakti hand in hand by the shore of the river some distance from the merry throng. It was the tune he played on Shakti's flute they heard wafted softly through the air, while Nirupama waited his return. Ah, poor child, how could he come to you? He has this hour found Shaktimoi, his young life's queen. He knows not Nirupama now, his soul is wrapped in her, whose face smiles on him, his youth's companion, and his boyhood's dream. He is once more the boy Ganesh Dev on that bright summer day, when by lake Mohipal he chose his Queen, the maiden of his heart,—naught else he knows. Alas, poor Nirupama, did the winds waft you a message of the scene by yonder shore?

CHAPTER XVII.

Ganesh Dev did not join the throng of merrymakers in the woods that day. Returning to the palace in the dead of night, the Prince was sad, he did not go to Nirupama, but sat in the verandah gazing at the starry sky above. Disturbing thoughts coursed madly through his brain, his heart was crushed with sorrow. His conscience knew but one recurring thought which stung him like an adder. "What have I done?" cried out his soul, "Great God, what have I done? This curse has fallen on her through my fault. She gave her heart to me and I cast her adrift. Ye gods, have mercy on me for the sin I did."

The *Bourani* was alone in her chamber. She grew anxious on account of her husband's long absence. She went out on the verandah and saw him sitting there alone. Softly in her sweet way she stepped up to him and from behind playfully put her little hands upon his eyes. The Prince knew but one name and that pervaded his whole being, he was absorbed and absent-minded; so when he spoke, what wonder he called out "Shakti?"

This stung her heart, hurt and surprised she answered, "It is I, Nirupama."

Her husband looked at her embarrassed and asked her to be seated by him. Yet his strange manner betrayed the change in his mind, he spoke not in his usual warm

affectionate tone. Her eyes grew moist, and she remained standing. She was sixteen years old now, and all the trusting simplicity of a child clung to her still. Her young heart's passionate love, blending with her timid self-effacing nature, had retained all the tenderness, freshness and sweetness of childhood.

Ganesh Dev was absent-minded still, but he realized that she was standing, and prompted by his inborn spirit of chivalry, he took her hand and drew her down beside him on the marble couch. Nirupama rested her head against her husband's shoulder, she buried her face in the folds of his garment and wept quietly. Seeing his young wife in tears, Ganesh Dev banished his own sorrows and putting his arm around her asked tenderly, "Why does my Nirupama weep?" Nirupama answered not, but when he tenderly repeated his questions she fixed her tearful eyes upon him and replied, "Rajkumar, tell me you love me."

He gently stroked her raven hair and softly said, "Have I not told you so a thousand times? And yet you ask me? How often must I tell you so, beloved?"

"If you, if you," she stammered. But when her husband fondly kissed her quivering lips, she put her arms around his neck and said, "If Shaktimati were here, then, I fear, you would forget me."

The Prince looked silently upon her tear-stained innocent face.

"Say, you will not forget me, tell me you are mine," she pleaded.

"If not yours, then whose am I?" answered Ganesh in an evading tone.

"I know not, I only know my heart feels heavy" and hiding her sweet face once more against his shoulder, the poor child gave way to copious tears.

How trying was this hour to him. His tender loving wife wept tears of deep misgiving, and yet still trusting him, she clung to him. His thoughts were dazed. If he married Shaktimoi and brought her home, Nirupama's tender heart would break. But if he forsook Shakti, he would force her to commit a great sin ; she would be forced to marry while in her heart she called him husband. The night that followed brought no sleep to him, his thoughts disturbed him, and ere the dawn broke he rose from his couch, stole noiselessly away from his sleeping wife and left the house. He now sought Shakti and would have a final understanding with her. Crossing the woods he heard the sound of drums and on the highroad saw mounted officers and foot soldiers around a crowd of curious towns-people. A soldier beat upon a drum and proclaimed aloud, "Nawab Gaias-ud-din has rebelled against the Sultan. The Badshah has declared war against him. Let all come forth who will fight for the Badshah."

Ganesh Dev approached one of the mounted officers and asked, "What offence has the Nawab committed ?"

The officer replied, "The Sultan wished to wed a certain Hindu maiden whom he saw yesterday at the sports, but the Nawab, who was deputed to negotiate the matter, has married her himself."

The Prince stood as if struck by a thunder bolt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Prince heard his name called, and this roused him from his stupor. It was a woman's voice that called, and it rang like distress and mad defiance. "Is that Maharaj Ganesh Dev I see there? Ganesh Dev, you stand unconcerned while a woman is insulted in your presence, you are unmoved by the sight of oppression and injustice? Sharhe on your honour, Maharaj, are you a true descendant of those heroes, your fathers, that once made Bengal great? No wonder then our motherland lies low, when thus her sons behave."

Glancing in astonishment in the direction of the voice, the Prince saw standing near a holy Sanyasini, her hands bound together and surrounded by soldiers. Startled by the sight he hastily drew near and asked the guards,

"Who is this woman, and why is she bound?"

The soldiers saluted him and one replied,

"Salam Huzoor.* The Fauzdar Sahib† informed the Sultan that the Crown Prince had stolen the Begum from the Mataji's house. The Sultan has demanded her arrest. We have but carried out his orders."

The Sanyasini smiled defiantly and full of scorn replied, "one man commits a theft, and another is hanged for it. A noble justice has been brought upon us."

Ganesh stepped forward, he unsheathed his sword and held it high in his right hand, then called out loudly to the guards, "stand aside and make a path for me if you value your lives."

The soldiers understood his design, and one said, "For God's sake, Maharaja, do not set her free, if you don't want that we should lose our heads. The wrath of the Fauzdar Sahib will fall on us."

Yet they retreated before his flashing sword while still entreating. And the Prince after severing the Mataji's bonds, addressed the frightened men and said, "Fear not. I will myself inform the General what I did, and that no blame must fall on you. And if he still insists on punishment then come to me, and I will enroll you in my regiment. Where is the General?"

"After issuing his orders to us he went to your Highness' palace."

The drum ceased; the curious crowd thronged round the soldiers. With a wave

* Salutations to His Lordship.

† Commander-in-Chief.

of the hand Ganesh Dev cleared the way and said to the now liberated priestess, "Come with me, mother, none of these men will dare to harm you."

The Mataji replied, "I know my son, that while I am with you, I need fear nothing. But let me lead the way, you follow me. The roads around here are well known to me."

The astonished crowd stood motionless, and the soldiers uttered not a word as the Maharaja and the priestess gradually disappeared from view among the woods.

CHAPTER XIX.

They went a short distance, then the Sanyasini stopped and said, "Take the road to the right, and you will reach the boundary of your garden. Go home now, and I will join you presently."

On nearing his palace the Rajkumar met Azim Khan, the Commander-in-chief of the Army, who addressed him saying, "Maharaja, I have come to you on an important errand. War has been declared between father and son. Prepare yourself to join the Sultan."

Ganesh Dev did not answer to the challenge, but asked instead, "General, what do your actions mean, why have you arrested an inoffensive Sanyasini?"

"I was obliged to do that, Maharaja, I only carried out the Badshah's orders. He

wants this woman in place of the other. If one can't get the rose, then let him be content with the carnation." He added this as a joke, hoping the Maharaja would take up the spirit and drop the matter there.

But to Ganesh this vulgar speech was revolting. "Azim Khan," he replied firmly, "speak not slightingly of woman. Who passed the order of her arrest concerns me not. I have set the Sanyasini free."

"Set free the Sanyasini? What do you mean Maharaja?"

"I severed her bonds."

"That does not go against the law as long as she is captive yet."

"I have let her go away, else why should I have cut her bonds?"

"Maharaja, do you mean to say you set the woman free, allowed her to escape?"

"Why else did I release her?"

"You must be jesting. How could she escape? I left her guarded by a 'troop of soldiers.'

"The soldiers did their duty, blame not them. I set her free by force and took her with me to a place of safety."

The General stood aghast. "What have you done? The Badshah wished to hear the story from her lips. But tell me, Maharaja, where she is. Give up the woman now, without delay, or you will be arrested as a rebel."

"If the Badshah passes an unjust order, I cannot be considered a rebel for violating it."

If it pleases him to call me so, however, tell him from me that for the service rendered by my grandfather to his father, I humbly beg this woman's liberty and exemption from all further molestation."

The General laughed. "Maharaja, you are young, you do not know the world. If you wish to make an enemy of a man, remind him of a service rendered to him. Unless you wish to incur the Sultan's displeasure, give up the Sanyasini."

"Never! You are a man, General. Tell me honestly, would you have acted otherwise if placed as I was? If a helpless innocent woman sought your protection, would you not then have braved the Sultan's wrath?"

"It is useless for us to argue, Maharaja. But bear in mind one thing, --I shall return shortly to take you prisoner. The devil has entered the Sultan. This is not the time to remind him of past benefits and talk theories with him."

"And may the Sultan bear in mind the fact that unless he abstains from molesting unprotected women, I shall cease to be a feudatory chief of his."

The General withdrew. He knew he should by rights have arrested Ganesh Dev on the spot, but he had yet some of the traits of manhood in him, and his better nature prompted him to give the young man a chance to save himself, still hoping that the Badshah might be amenable to reason.

No sooner had the General left, than the Sanyasini stepped up to the Prince. "We must stay here no longer", she said. "If we delay, the enemy will seize us. I have told your captain to prepare the troops. Bring the inmates of your house and with your family follow me at once. A battle is imminent, and you must prepare your camp immediately in a safe place."

An hour later Ganesh Dev and the members of his household left the palace at Pandua which they had occupied during their sojourn there. When later Azim Khan returned with orders to arrest the Maharaja of Dinajpore, he found the palace deserted.

CHAPTER XX.

The flame of war was kindled in Bengal. Foiled and angered at the treachery of his son, the Sultan became still more enraged at the news of the Sanyasini's release. Infuriated he exclaimed, "This is adding insult to injury. First the knave releases the woman, and then he makes bold to petition her release. Does he think he can play with me? You should have arrested the fool-hardy boy before coming here. General, you have failed in your duty."

• Shocked at this reproof, Azim Khan replied, "Protector of the World, your humble servant admits he is to blame. But conditions are against us. We are at war

with Nawab Shah, and if we arrest the Maharaja of Dinajpore, we shall have to fight him as well. It will be no easy task to take him prisoner. It would mean loss of strength, and that would be most fatal at the present moment. Dinajpore has strong forces, and if we win him to our side, we could defeat the enemy without difficulty."

The Sultan was in no mood to listen to reason. His anger was roused all the more by Azim Khan's explanations and he replied madly, "Azim Khan, do you mean to imply that without that stripling's help I cannot overcome my foe? Do you think I am calmly going to take such insult from that boy?"

Azim Khan knew his master too well to say more on the subject. "No, Your Majesty," he stammered, "I did not mean that, I only await my Lord's orders."

"My orders are already given. Go, arrest this insolent scoundrel and bring him before me."

The General went but to find that Ganesh was gone. On his return from the deserted palace he met Gaias-ud-din's General with his troops. A fight ensued. There was some loss on either side, and then, as evening fell, they disappeared in the forest. The next day by order of the Badshah, troops were sent to explore the woods. Ganesh Dev was encamped there. His troops gained daily in strength, new recruits came in from Dinajpore and other places in

larger numbers. The Sultan had to contend with two foes, the forces of his son and those of Ganesh Dev.

CHAPTER XXI.

And now let us return again to the day when the feat of arms was performed at Pandua, the day on which Shaktimoi's fatal garland was thrown for the last time, that garland that had crushed the maiden's heart but caused the hearts of men to flame with mad desire and blood to flow from many wounds.

Sultan Sekander Shah, charmed by the beautiful Bengali, desired to win her for his harem. So in the evening he took Azim Khan aside, and in a retired spot in the garden gave him instructions. He was to find the girl and to bring her thither. Just then the Crown-prince, Nawab Gaias-ud-din, came up to give his salutation to his father ere retiring for the night. Azim Khan acquainted him with what his father wished, and asked him as an obedient son to help in carrying out the plan..

Gaias-ud-din became amazed as the truth dawned upon him. He did himself desire the beautiful Hindu girl. What should ~~he~~ do, face his own father as a rival? To do this meant that he must stake power, wealth and kingdom, or perhaps even life itself. Should he withdraw or risk all this? For a

moment he knew not which way to turn, but finally decided he would not withdraw. The fascination of the affair grew upon him with each fleeting minute, and he would sooner risk his life than yield. Gaias-ud-din had never yet checked his desires, he had been trained to give full sway to youthful impulses. Then now give up the maiden his heart craved to please his father ? Never !

The Nawab Shah was Governor of the presidency of Subarnagram, where he resided and had come to the capital to attend the fete. In his own dominion his rule was supreme, the very currency was struck in his name. The Badshah gladly granted him this power. Gaias-ud-din would succeed him to the throne, so there could no harm ensue from the exercise of power on the part of the heir apparent. He grudged him not this influence in his own jurisdiction. But Sekander Shah discovered to his cost the fatal consequences to himself of having given all this power to his son.

Having learned his father's intentions Gaias-ud-din began his task with caution. He went to his own quarters and prepared for his return to Subarnagram. That night his household and a certain portion of his troops were despatched. The remaining portion he accoutréd to accompany him, and now he awaited the coming of Kutab.

And who was Kutab ? He was the man the young Crown-prince trusted in all things, the man who helped to carry out all

his plans, and had no pangs of conscience as regards the nature of these plans. The whole nature of the young Mussulman Prince was a desire to have all his wishes gratified, and Kutab not only helped to fulfil them but prompted them as well. Therefore he was indispensable to him. As soon as he had seen the beautiful Shakti, desire seized the young prince, and Kutab knowing him as he did, had divined his feeling from his glance and now was busy in tracing the girl to win her for his master. That he would return with his task accomplished, the Crown-prince doubted not, for when had Kutab ever failed to carry out a plan he undertook? So he sat in eager expectation and counted the minutes till his counsellor's return. His only thought "now was to reach his own domain in safety with his prey. Once there, protection was assured. It was nearly midnight when Kutab at last arrived with the welcome tidings that the bird was in the net. There was no need for further anxiety, they had only now to go and take their prey.

Gaias-ud-din then related what happened in the meantime, and Kutab considering the Nawab's action suitable to the occasion, praised him accordingly. Being now reassured, the prince sought his friend's counsel further. He desired to have the marriage solemnized before carrying the girl off and then to receive her as his bride with

the usual royal ceremonies. But there was a difficulty. Since war was sure to come, there was no place safe enough in which to deck Shakti in the Begum's apparel and welcome her with the honours fitted to the occasion. What could Kutab suggest? Gais-ud-din was so blinded by his passion that he absolutely ignored the sword that hung suspended over his head, the frightful danger he was incurring. He was accustomed to yield to his desires, and he was led astray by passion and bad counsel.

Kutab was as ever equal to the situation. His father, the Prime Minister, possessed a princely garden house situated in a quiet spot. This was a suitable place for the purpose, and he immediately despatched messengers to the Manager to have all in readiness. The Commander of Gaias-ud-din's troops, Hossein Khan, was sent on this errand, accompanied by the remaining escort and two palanquins bearing female attendants.

That done, the Nawab Shah and his adviser with an empty palanquin and half a dozen soldiers, went to fetch their prey, the unfortunate unsuspecting Hindu girl. As they approached the temple, the soldiers and the palanquin bearers upon orders from Kutab, hid in the woods. Then the two friends surreptitiously entered the shrine that profane feet may not tread. Hidden by the cover of darkness they defied the law with impunity. Kutab had previ-

ously made himself acquainted with the temple. He had followed the girl as far as its gate. Then seeing her enter one apartment, he entered the shrine room and there overheard part of the conversation between her and her aunt. He had worn the garb of a Mohammedan dervish while in the woods, but now he saw fit to don another garb. After entering the house of Kali he divested himself of his Mussalman's robes, he removed his turban and wound it round his body as a loin-cloth. Taking from Kali's throat some gralands of red hybicus, he twined them round his head and shrunk not from taking a hideous garland of skulls which hung on the wall and adorned himself with it. With the red sandal paste from a secret vessel in front of the image he made marks on his forehead and over his body. He now appeared like a Hindu *kápálic*, which is the most cruel of the many sects that worship Kali.

"Now then, your Highness," he exclaimed, "we shall see what is to be done next."

Looking through a hole in the wall into the *yogini*'s apartment, he whispered cautiously, "Nawab Shah, remain concealed behind the image, the girl is coming here." Then both hid behind the goddess, and when the time came, Kutab in a feigned voice responded to Shakti's words. The rest is known to the reader.

CHAPTER XXII.

Shaktimoyi was in the Prime Minister's palatial garden-house. But the dazzling scene of grandeur that burst upon her vision, affected her for a minute only. Her soul was too lofty to be enwrapt by glittering show. Further more, surroundings like these, she felt, were her just due. Predestined by birth to fill a throne, she had now fulfilled her destiny, become a queen, and was not royal splendour the tribute of a queen? The spacious room she entered was adorned with mirrors, which lined the four walls. Near them stood luxuriously fitted couches, around which flowing creepers twined their tendrils. Here and there were white marble fountains, decked with flowers, from which fell showers of rose-water, mingling its sweet odours with the fragrance of the blossoms and filling the room with exquisite delight. Shakti was accompanied by several beautiful female attendants, robed in rich attire. And as she looked it seemed she was surrounded by a hundred fairies in lovely gardens without number. The reflecting mirrors wrought such charm that the girl felt herself transported into paradise. But in the midst of this unearthly splendour she saw a maiden poorly dressed, a hundred times reflected. And then she smiled, for this poor maiden was herself. Now a sense of proud gratification came upon her. All these extraordi-

nary splendours were for her. She, the poor girl, who had walked the highroads as a pilgrim from shrine to shrine, and knew not home nor rest, now swayed her sceptre over thousands, who at a wave from her fair hand would sacrifice their lives to do her bidding.

Her servants led her to the bath. Four attendants spread before her four regal robes of different hues, set with pearls and diamonds and other precious stones.

"Begum Sahiba" they said, "Which of these will be your bridal dress?"

Shakti beheld them one by one and then replied with scorn upon her lips, "I do not find them worthy; have you none better?"

The women were struck dumb at this reply, at length one took heart to say, "Begum Sahiba, for these very robes three Begums quarrelled and are enemies and yet your Highness says they are unworthy."

"These are the garments," said another, "worn by the mother of the Nawab Shah, the late Sultana Sahib. Since her death three Begums have attempted to obtain them. But the Nawab Shah would not yield them and put them by. He has now sent them to adorn your Highness for the bridal."

"I do not want them", said the Hindu maiden coldly, "send them to the three Begums as a present from the new Begum."

"And the fourth robe?"

"The fourth? Which of the Begums was the favourite of the Nawab Shah hitherto?"

"Motia Jan."

"Then send this robe to Motia Jan."

"As your Highness orders," was the girl's reply, "but what will our new Begum wear?"

"Have you no sari? A sari and a veil are all that I require."

The maid opened a chest and took out saris richly embroidered and of various colours and veils of many kinds. From these Shakti selected a white sari studded with diamonds and a white veil embroidered with pearls.

Then came the bath. That finished Shakti donned her costly garments and now attired as a bride lay half reclining on a cushioned couch in soft repose. The maids were busy with their mistress; one dried her glossy hair, another fanned her gently, a third one stained her feet with henna and others sprinkled her fair form with attar and rose-water. Two maids brought out a jewel box and placed rich ornaments before her, whose brilliance was unparalleled, and whose workmanship was marvellous beyond compare. Gold, rubies, emeralds, turquoise, diamonds and pearls sent their bright lustre till the eye was dazzled. The diamonds were of clearest crystal, and when the maid held up before her a diamond necklace of a hundred rows and a tiara thickly studded with starry gems like the milky way, it seemed as if a thousand sunbeams flashed. She had seen jewels in the palace of Dinajpore, but never any so magnificent, so superbly beautiful as these.

At last she chose from the glittering heap before her some diamond ornaments. Her toilet complete, she went back to the hall of mirrors. The Nawab was impatient to receive his bride and waited with anxious heart to hear that she was ready. Now Shakti saw the gem-adorned figure reflected as she had seen the simple maiden there before. She scarcely knew herself, her beauty was entrancing, she saw it herself. But the terrible truth came home to her—for whose sake was she thus adorned? Slowly the tears collected in her eyes; was this her bridal day, the day her heart had longed for? Wealth, power, state, all these were hers, but her soul wept, what was it all to her? What is life to a woman when her love lies slain? Ganesh Dev was not hers, would never be. Was she not selling soul and body for mere show, was she not losing everything, her very honour by this act? Was this the vengeance she had prayed for? On whom did now this dreadful vengeance fall? The curses she had called upon Ganesh had turned upon herself and now destroyed in her all that makes woman godlike. How terrible she seemed in her own sight, the dignity of womanhood polluted, could she still claim to be of human kind? A dreadful thought took hold of her, she was a ghoul, a demon in fair form. She had lost all connection with her former self, she could no more approach the people of her race, she was an outcaste, the very thought of her would fill them

with loathing. And above all, Ganesh, what would he think of her? If he had never loved her, still he had honoured her, revered her name, but now? Alas! why had she not remained a homeless wanderer or become a sanyasini like her aunt, rather than sell her soul? Her noble spirit shrank at these reflections, but repentance came too late.

A maid came in and broke her reverie. "The Nawab Shah awaits your Highness' pleasure. Shall I send word that the Begum is ready?"

"Yes, ask him to come in." Then Shakti left the room and called a maid and said, "Where are the garments that I wore? Bring them here." And now she stripped off her ornaments, took off those regal robes she wore and gave them to her maid. The girl became surprised and murmured, "But Begum Sahiba, what will the Nawab say?"

"That concerns me alone. Go, bring me my things at once."

The woman obeyed silently. Shakti now donned her pilgrim's garb and then returned to the hall of mirrors, where the young Crown-prince stood awaiting her. Seeing his bride still in her old attire, he exclaimed in great astonishment, "What does this mean? Is that dress fit for the Queen of Bengal?"

"I am not yet Queen of Bengal. While yet the war continues I shall wear this dress."

Gais-ud-din felt sore at heart to hear her

speak so proudly, to see the strong defiance in her act. He tried to persuade her, speaking gently. "Beloved, for your sake I have pledged all wealth, prosperity and kingdom. Bright happy looks from you should strengthen me in this my hour of danger. Still in their place what do I see, what mood is this?"

And he advanced towards her, but the proud girl retreated, saying, "Protector of the World, touch me not. My vow is taken, while this war continues, I cannot be—"

The Crown-prince stood amazed, his eyes flashed anger. Before she finished speaking, he broke out, "Am I to act according to your orders? You should obey my bidding, not I yours. You are my wife now, my own property, whatever you may say."

Shakti's strong soul was roused, scorn flashed from the midnight lustre of her eyes. Her tone was firm when she replied, "Then may it please your Highness to know that I am not your wife and never shall be. Allow me to depart, or else I shall—"

She could not finish, for a maid entered and said hastily, "Protector of the World, Kutub-Shah requests that you will see him at once, he waits outside. Great danger is impending."

The Nawab yielded to Shakti's superior strength and humbly replied, "Forgive me dearest, I will be your slave. I now go forth to fight and know not whether I shall

return to see my bride or not. Is there not one embrace from her for whom I am about to die? Grant this, beloved, and death itself will lose its sting."

The maiden stood unmoved and resolute. "Protector of the World, I must remain true to my vow. As long as this war lasts I cannot be your wife. If you do not wish to bring sorrow on both you and me, abstain from further entreaties, else you will learn that not a hundred body-guards will keep me prisoner in your harem."

From without the sound of shouting was heard. Kutab rushed in exclaiming loudly, "Be quick, my lord, be quick. If you delay we shall be taken prisoners. The maids are already in the palanquins. Let the Begum Sahiba be placed in another. There is no time to be lost. We must escape through the forest."

And this was the happiness for which the young Prince had staked all, this the bridal day to attain which men were laid low and women fled and wept. All he had gained was a cold reply from the maiden he adored, and with the bitter memory of this upon him and the desire of his heart for once unsatisfied, Gais-ud-din, dejected and morose, set out upon his path of danger.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Badshah was working out his own destruction by obstinacy and want of judgment. He had made enemies all around, both at home and abroad, and he had no fixity of either policy or purpose. His military advisers were worried to death by a succession of contradictory orders. Naturally the results were only too often unfavourable, and in such cases those who had executed the Sultan's orders were subject to severe reprimands, but whenever good results were obtained the Badshah withheld the due credit from those who deserved it. This caused an undercurrent of discontent in the council. The army was demoralized and dispirited. Food was scarce in the land. The able-bodied peasants had been taken from the field to bear the Sultan's arms, and the work of cultivation had fallen upon the women and children. The famine-stricken country was unable to supply the army with proper rations. It had become difficult for the soldiers to secure two meals a day, and now to reach the climax of their adversity, the fortunes of war were against them; for if they succeeded in beating the enemy once, they were defeated thrice in return. The war could not continue much longer at this rate; more than a year had passed since its beginning. Again and again the Council advised the Sultan to make peace with the Raja of

Dinajpore and with his help overpower the Crown-prince. So far the Sultan had stubbornly neglected this advice, but the time had come when he could do so no longer. Gais-ud-din, whose forces had increased enormously, was rapidly advancing upon the Capital with a large army. The successful man draws a following. When people saw that the Crown-prince had the advantage over his father, they flocked to his standard in large numbers. The other seven sons of the Sultan, having vainly tried to check his course were clamouring for more troops. And the Council, with one accord, urged the Sultan to make peace with Ganesh Deb, who was encamped not far from the capital and defeating the Sultan's men wherever he met them. If the Imperial forces were united with those of Dinajpore, they could oppose the Nawab Shah with greater strength. This was the only way to escape from the dilemma. The Sultan fully recognised the truth of all this. But he was disgusted with what he had brought upon himself, and fumed against fate which compelled him, the all-powerful Sultan, to seek aid from the puny Raja of Dinajpore, who by rights should cringe at his feet.

• Yet though he cursed the fates, he was helpless, and the more he realised this the more his irritation increased.

A general meeting of the council was convened. The Commander-in-chief himself had left his camp to be present in order to

give the Sultan an exact idea of the critical position. His explanation, however, was received with reproach.

"Has not that wretched little Dinajpore been brought to subjection yet?" asked the angry Badshah. "General, you are good for nothing. You are slow in carrying out my orders. On every side do I see signs of negligence."

The Council remained silent. At last the General replied, "Ruler of the Universe, had we only been allowed to keep our troops two days longer at Dinajpore, we should have subjugated the Raja. But by your Majesty's orders we were obliged to give up the attack and immediately march towards Subarnagram."

Then the aged minister, Azim Khan's father, spoke up and said, "Prince Sharif-ud-din, whom your Majesty has made crown-prince, surrounded Gais-ud-din on the road to Banagram and sent for more troops, but—"

"My belief is that Sharif-ud-din was deceived by false news," interrupted the Badshah.

"Your Majesty has been misinformed", replied the minister, "for want of sufficient troops it was impossible to blockade Banagram properly by either land or water. If Azim Khan could have arrived there one day earlier, Gais-ud-din would certainly have been captured."

"What is this I hear, Azim Khan? If you

had been a day earlier, victory would have been ours, then why were you late?"

"Your Majesty, how was it possible for me to be at Banagram when I was fighting Ganesh in Dinajpore? Prince Farid Shah was ordered to join the Nawab Sahib Sharif-ud-din."

"But my orders were that you as well should join Sharif-ud-din, leaving Nawab Shams-ud-din in your place."

"That order came later. When it reached us we could not get to Banagram in time. We were delayed in the first place by the strong current of the Purnabhaga river, swollen to excess during the rains. Next the heavy rains and the bad condition of the roads made rapid transport impossible. When we reached the scene of action, we found we were too late."

"Impossible! Never before did I hear such an explanation from the mouth of a commander-in-chief. I see my mistake now in having made you General."

The General remained silent not daring to give vent to his just anger. But the minister replied, "It will do us no good to dwell upon the past. We are wasting time, for every minute Gais-ud-din is gaining strength. If he is not defeated soon, it will be difficult to save the kingdom. It must be decided at once whether or not to make an alliance with Dinajpore."

Necessity compelled the Sultan to give in. He yielded at last with very bad grace

and said addressing the minister, "Very well, you may propose an alliance, but take care we do not have to suffer the indignity of a refusal."

Azim Khan had already sounded Ganesh Dev. The sanyasini being the cause of the dispute, Ganesh Dev's conditions were that she should be exempt from any further punishment, and that he should obtain remission of tribute to compensate him for losses incurred in the war. The Badshah consented to these terms, and the Maharaja of Dinajpore was invited to a royal durbar to be held the next day, so that both parties might sign the treaty. As a proof of good faith the Sultan sent his grandson, Saheb-ud-din and suite, to remain as hostages in the Dinajpore camp.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Ganesh Dev came to the Durbar, but the Badshah's conduct was not worthy of a man of honour. He had invited the young Raja as a friend, but the reception he accorded him was anything but friendly. Not even a seat was offered to the guest.

Ganesh Dev being a scion of one of the oldest and most aristocratic families of the land, showed his lofty nature in his countenance and manners, and when he entered the assembly so far outshone all there by his proud bearing, that the Sultan seeing it, got

vexed. He saluted the Emperor with chivalry, but there was not a trace of submission in his action. The great Badshah felt touched to the quick that he the overlord, should have been unable all this time to curb the proud spirit of this young prince, and he showed his contempt in this discourteous behaviour. The assembly were aghast at the Sultan's manners, and dead silence ensued. At last the Emperor spoke in a stern voice, "Ganesh Dev, what do you want?"

The latter, who had already noticed the signs of an approaching storm, said calmly and respectfully, "what I want I have already stated, and your Majesty having assented to my proposals, I have come hither to sign the treaty. But if your Majesty wish to raise the question afresh, in compliance with your desire I state that I want the acquittal of the sannyasini, and that the losses I have sustained should be made good by the remission of the tribute money for Dinajpore."

The Sultan knit his brow and said, "But how am I to be recompensed for the losses I have sustained through your rebellion?"

"I will help your Mejesty in the war against the Crown-prince."

"That a feudatory chief is bound to do whether he wishes it or not. By refusing to help me in war against an enemy, you render yourself liable to punishment. What is to be the punishment for your rebellion?"

"That should have been decided before I

came here. By pledging your good faith you brought me into your power. To harbour any thoughts of punishment now would be a breach of that good faith."

"To meet cunning with cunning is no breach of good faith. There is no other way of keeping the peace. Azim Khan, arrest this man."

No one had thought the Sultan capable of such mad conduct. Azim Khan stood as if rooted to the spot and stared at the Emperor in amazement. It was he who had negotiated with Ganesh Dev and brought him to the Durbar, relying on the Sultan's word. Thus, unwittingly, he had been the agent in this treachery. His whole nature revolted against this injustice. Unable to keep silent any longer, he spoke and said, "The Maharaja has come hither trusting your Majesty's word of honour. If this faith is broken, the Emperor's fair name will be tarnished, and in future no one will place confidence in him."

"Silence, you are insolent. Karim-ud-din, from today you are my General. Arrest these two men, this insolent Azim Khan and this rebel of Dinajpore. This punishment should have been inflicted on them long ago."

"Protector of the World," spoke the newly chosen General, "the retainers of the rebel of Dinajpore are at the gate. What is to be done with them?"

"Arrest them also."

The Badshah's orders were obeyed. Azim Khan and Ganesh Dev were led away in the custody of Karim-ud-din. When the aged minister of State saw this, he struck his forehead with the palm of his hand and exclaimed loudly, "Sultan, Sultan, what have you done? You have left us no means of defence. You have arrested the leader of the army and that for no fault of his."

"For no fault of his?" roared the enraged Badshah. "I kept him in his post so long simply because he is your son. I now see that he is at the bottom of all this mischief."

"And since your Majesty has arrested the ruler of Dinajpore, war must continue with both parties. God alone knows where all this will end."

"You must have gone out of your head, where is your reason? If I put Ganesh Dev in prison, then who will fight me?"

"His army. Does your Majesty think his mother will bear his arrest quietly? As long as a single able man remains in his Raj he will fight for the Raja."

"But if he is put to death—then?"

"It seems your Majesty has forgotten the fact that Prince Saheb-ud-din is kept as hostage in the enemy's camp. If the rumour of the Maharaja's arrest gets abroad, the young Prince's life will be in danger."

"The soldiers who came with Ganesh Dev are also prisoners. The news will not reach the enemy's camp very quickly.

Make the most of this opportunity and release Saheb-ud-din."

"Your Majesty," replied the minister in despair, "who will carry out your orders? Listen to the advice of one whose hair has grown white with age and experience. Release Azim Khan and make friends with Dinajpore, otherwise we shall be ruined. Satan seems to have entered you."

"You are my Satan," exclaimed the Sultan angrily. "Do you know that your son Kutab is Gais-ud-din's adviser? Hence all this trouble."

"On that very account I have cast him off."

"But that does not benefit me. I verily believe that Azim Khan is also secretly plotting with Gais-ud-din for my destruction. Else can you explain why the enemy has not yet been defeated?"

This was too much for the aged minister. He lost his repose, the insult stung him deeply, and he called out indignantly, "For shame your Majesty, for shame, such suspicion is unworthy of a king. I fully now expect the charge that I myself belong to Gais-ud-din's party."

Sultan Sekander Shah was beyond himself, he seemed to have gone mad and unhesitatingly replied, "I have my misgivings as to that as well, else why should you be so anxious to prove your own innocence?"

How terrible they sounded, those words of cruel accusation from those royal lips to that dervish-garbed, saintly man who had served

the crown with unswerving loyalty for so many years. He stood aghast a while, but soon his calm returned and solemnly he replied, "Sultan Sekander Shah, Allah himself must be against you, or this misguiding spirit would not have taken hold of you. I now resign my post of duty. Heed my last words of warning. The road that you have taken leads to ruin, retrace your steps ere yet it is too late."

The assembly were so exasperated by the Sultan's evil conduct, that they seemed paralyzed. They did not stop the departing Minister of State with even a sign. A wave of silent disapproval filled the room when the door closed behind him. The assembled nobles now gave signs of discontent and Sekander Shah saw what was going on, still he did not change his course. The assembly then adjourned, feeling more dispirited than ever. On the next morning the war-council met again.

It had been raining the whole of the previous night. The weather seemed to be in sympathy with the general sentiment in the Sultan's court,—gloom every where, in doors and out. But worse than gloom was in store, for suddenly a storm cloud burst upon them. A guard rushed in trembling with haste and fear and loudly called, "Your Majesty, the Nawab Shah Gais-ud-din is approaching. Nawab Jalal-ud-din is unable to check his progress. The enemy will soon be upon us."

The Sultan turned pale with agitation and called out nervously, "Azim Khan, call Azim Khan."

"He is a prisoner by your Majesty's orders." It was Karim-ud-din who spoke.

The Sultan's eyes flamed with excitement. "Go, take your troops and help Jelal-ud-din. Give orders for the release of Azim Khan and bring him here."

Karim-ud-din departed but returning presently informed the king, "The small number of troops we have here are being accoutred, and I shall lead them to the fight by your Majesty's orders."

"And Azim Khan, where is he?"

"He has fled."

"Fled?"

"Yes".

"Whither."

"I hear he has gone to join the Nawab Shah Gais-ud-din."

The great Badshah could not grasp the truth. The room, the house, the people all seemed to swim round him in mad confusion. "Bring Ganesh Dev," he called out.

"He too has fled."

"He also fled? Oh my Minister, my Minister, what shall we do?"

"The Minister has departed as well." I hear it rumoured he too is joining Gais-ud-din."

This roused the Sultan's feeling to its height. Still the crisis did not crush him. He rose and in a voice half frantic with

despair called out, "All gone, deserted ! Then behold your Sultan, he will himself be your commander."

This created a reaction, a storm of patriotism took hold of the assembly. They saw their leader helpless, this fanned the dying spark of their courage into a flame. They rose to their feet like one man and in high spirit with one voice exclaimed, "Victory to the Badshah !"

Preparations were soon made. It being the time of war, troops were ready to be called to action, and in an hour all was ready. Soon they were on the march, Sultan Sekander Shah himself leading his army. The whole of the next day the battle raged between sire and son, and continued for three days.

The end of this war is known to all who are acquainted with the history of Bengal, the annals of the land record it. On the third day Sekander Shah was killed. His lacerated body was laid to rest in the silent tomb of the immense "Adina Masjid", prepared years before to receive the mortal remains of the great Sultan. His son, the rebel Gais-ud-din, succeeded his father to the throne.

CHAPTER XXV.

Ganesh Dev had pitched his camp on a lofty clearing in the forest skirting Banshiharipore not far from Pandua. Just below the camp stood a small lake the water of which was clear as crystal. And this lake had a legend attached to it. Why should it not? Has not every brook, every tree, nay almost every stone a legend to its credit in this mystic land of dreams and poetry? Then why deprive a crystal lake of that privilege? To the lofty imagination of the Oriental each slight act must carry with it something that makes an impress on the mind. As to satisfying the material need only, that is beneath his dignity. And so there was a crystal lake and with its waters the soldiers quenched their thirst. It must needs have a halo or the lake would cease to be a lake.

Then to the legend. Readers are aware that at the beginning of the war when the Maharaaja of Dinajpore had been declared a rebel by the Government, Azim Khan, under the Sultan's orders, was pursuing him. Owing to the small number of his troops Ganesh Dev was unable to engage in a pitched battle. Tired out by constant pursuit, overcome by thirst and faint for want of food and rest, the soldiers reached this spot. Not a drop of water was seen anywhere around. In despair at the situation, the Raja was on the point of surrender, when the sanyasini, who had gone in quest of food, suddenly appear-

ed with provisions. She soon saw the exhausted condition of the men and pointed to a spot at a little distance, asking the Raja whether he had searched for water there. Ganesh replied that the whole vicinity had been searched. "But let us look again," replied the priestess confidently. She then pointed in a certain direction, and to the delight of the thirsty men a sheet of pellucid water appeared before their view. They raised a shout of joy, and moved by the inborn religious impulse of their race, prostrated themselves at her feet ere they rushed to the lake to quench their thirst.

The cool water mixed with the hereditary faith of the Hindu in the supernatural, soon worked magic. There were divine properties in this lake, for it had strengthened them as nothing else could do. This soon became a firm conviction. This lake meant even more, its influence was lucky to their regiment, for after they had drunk of this water, they were so strong that they could disperse the foe without great difficulty. They therefore called this lake the Gift Lake. They did not remain there long that time, because the war continued, and the enemy was pursuing them. They retired to Dinajpore to strengthen their forces. But the fortunes of war turned in their favour, and gradually they succeeded in defeating the foe and advancing upon the capital. When again they came near Pandua, by this lake they must pitch their

camp and nowhere else. This they did a week before their Raja was inveigled into the Sultan's presence, from which, as we have seen, he had the good fortune to escape.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was the end of the rainy season. The midday rain had ceased, but the sky was still cloudy. This was not one of those autumn afternoons which are brightened by the golden effulgence of the setting sun. The rain-drops dripped from shining leaves and a breeze stirred the smooth stillness of the lake.

The ugly bull-frogs croaked in the wet grass, and the cricket's doleful chirp suggested evening, although it was only a little past noon. The measured tread of the stalwart sentries patrolling the camp, harmonised with the universal solemnity all around.

Some of the attendants of the Maharaja's household were seated on the newly constructed embankment of the lake. Although not enlisted soldiers, they were armed and fully equipped for fight. All the forces were kept ready for an emergency, and the Maharaja's men were seated with dagger girded on and spear in hand. In those days the Bengalis were a fighting race, they had not then come to their present state of helplessness,

in which the people of Bengal have retained naught but their ideals, which thanks to the Great Preserver, are still strong enough to point the way to higher realization and a future to equal the past.

Among these men was Nabin Adhikari, a dramatist and theatrical manager, and the husband of the gay Rangini whom we have met in the garden festival at Pandua. The Raja was so fond of his songs that he had made him the Court-poet, and he was held in high esteem. The most noted of his songs was Krishna's Wooing, and this was so well known that it was on the lips of young and old alike. He was forty-five years of age and had four wives, three of whom had been chosen for him by his parents in his childhood. The fourth, the pretty Rangini, had come into his life through a romantic incident. A cousin of his had deputed him to see the girl and get her for him. But Nabin Adhikari, ever young in love and wooing, would not let so precious an opportunity escape him, and so outwitting his unsuspecting cousin, he wound up the bargain by marrying the girl himself. Thus his life had hitherto been spent in continuous courtship, and fame and fortune had smiled on him alike. Suddenly, however, this aggravating war changed all. The young Rani had followed her husband into the camp and Rangini refused to be parted from her mistress and followed her. And the Brahmin minstrel, unwilling to be parted from his young wife, had no

course left 'him but to go with her. And thus we find Nabin Adhikari at the camp, accoutred with sword and spear in addition to flute of love and lyre.

In time of war love songs are out of tune. The Raja and his counsellors were busy with the plans of the campaign. No one would listen to the poet's songs. He seldom left the camp, for whenever he did, he was obliged to dress up like a sepoy. But idle hands were not allowed in camp. Since sword and spear were too hard for the touch of fingers trained to string the lyre, a soft instrument had to be found for poet's hands. And so the poet laureate found his place in the culinary department, and the minstrel was forced to exchange the flute of love for the ladle, his Brahminical caste fitting him particularly for this service. This was not a bit more to his taste than fighting, but it was less dangerous. Of course, on the stage he was accustomed to dressing up in many ways. There he impersonated many characters and not unfrequently donned woman's garb, for one of his favourite characters was Brinda, the messenger of Radhika. But when it came to playing a role in actual life and a most unromantic one to boot—well that was quite another thing.

On this rainy day, however, his poetical spirit could not contain itself in camp and kitchen and so sareng* in hand, to pour forth

* A musical instrument. The violin was not introduced in the Indian Theatre until after the advent of the Portuguese.

once more his songs of love's joy and woe, he had joined the crowd by the lake with sword girded on. He took off his turban and placed it beside him. His head was shaven, leaving only a little tuft of hair about three or four inches long, in the centre. This was twisted in a knot at the end.

And now the poet was inspired, he closed his little blinking eyes and nodded his shaven head in tune to the music. His fingers softly played the sareng, while he began to sing—

The Sravan* month has come, the month of rain,
The clouds are dense, like evening is the day.
The rivers overflow; the rustling leaves complain
The rain drops fall with melancholy play.

But alas, for the poor minstrel, his song fell flat today, there was no appreciative audience to applaud him, and his music was drowned by loud talk and laughter. He was about to give the second verse when one interrupted him, saying, "what do you say to it, Thakur?"

The Brahmin became vexed and retorted, "All I have to say to you is that you may remain separated from your sweet-heart the whole of the rainy season, and may heaven preserve me from such dull company as this."

Srikantha Paramanick, the barber, replied, "Moonshi †Mahashoy let the Thakur

* July.

† A scholar of the Persian and Arabian languages.

‡ Sir.

sing and listen to him quietly. Go on, Thakur, I am homesick, and your song soothes my sore heart."

The Brahmin was pleased and continued.

"The winds blow madly on with icy breath, and ever and anon the lightnings flash,--"

"Bravo Thakur," interrupted Paramanick, "Bravo. Unfortunately I have nothing with me with which to prove my gratitude."

The Thakur felt encouraged and went on singing but the unpoetical spirit of the audience manifested itself again. Paramanick who had been interrupted in the narration of his strange dream was beseeched by all to resume the thread. Remarking that Paramanick is famous for his dreams the Bhandari cried out "Go on with it friend."

"Yes tell us what did you see in your dream last night" said the munshi.

"I thought I saw the southern sky turn red."

"And from it blood poured down and flooded the earth"--you said,--did you not eh?" asked Shiam Sardar, the wrestling master.

"Oh such streams of blood", continued the barber, "there was a sea of blood flowing all around with waves rising high upon it as in a storm. And then I saw these waves were men, and, oh, I beheld myself as one of them. I then began a loud lament. But suddenly there appeared the divine form of [†]Bhagavati, seated on a lotus

* Steward.

† A goddess of the Hindu mythology.

and gently said, "Fear not, my child, fear not." Then I awoke.

"Wonderful, wonderful," called out the listeners in a chorus, "whom did the figure resemble?"

"The sannyasini."

"It must have been she," the learned Moonshi replied, "she saved us once, and now by her power we shall be victorious in the war. This is an auspicious dream indeed."

The Raj Baidya, * Nikunja Sen, who absorbed in his own thoughts, had kept quiet all this while, remarked somewhat abruptly, "May it come true. May the Mussulman's pride be humbled and with it the vanity and nonsense of the Hakims †. Fraud, fraud the whole system is a fraud, I should like to see Hakim Nazir Ali, then?" And then the learned doctor relapsed into silence again. Becoming as grave as before and looked in another direction as if he had not spoken at all. He usually kept himself aloof of the crowd.

Shiam Sardar took up the thread of the conversation, and said, "But to quarrel with the Badshah is no easy matter."

"In what respect is our Maharaja inferior to the Sultan?" asked the barber.

To which the Moonshi added "Especially when the divine Sannyasini is on our side?" "That is true," replied the wrestler, "but it is so long since we left home that our houses

* A physician of the Hindu system of medicine.

† Physicians of the Mohammedan system of medicine.

must have gone to wreck and ruin. Goodness alone knows what may have become of our families."

"Can you tell me," said another, "why the Raja's mother is so much against the sannya-sini ? The very mention of her name angers her, and she asserts the priestess is the cause of this war, that she is an impostor, and that it will go badly with the Maharaja as long as she is with us."

"The Maharanee fears that this war will have serious results some day," put in the Bhandari. "She therefore urges to have it abandoned and peace made with the Badshah."

"What she says is true," answered the Sardar, "I hope peace will be made."

"Plague on you for talking in that way," this angry reproach came from the barber, "if the Mahanaja were to humble himself before the Sultan, the latter would become so inflated with pride that nothing could save us, he would soon force the whole kingdom to read the Koran. But if our Raja is victorious, he may become Sultan one day, and then we shall have the days of Ram's golden reign again. There will then be no more oppression in the land. What happy times we shall have then."

This glowing picture satisfied the Sardar. "That is true," he said, somewhat consoled.

"What a pity Ganapati is not here. He is a great astrologer. He would soon interpret Paramanick's dream for us," said the

Moonshi, who was interested in dreams, to which the Sardar replied once more.

"Perhaps the Thakur can help us. He is a Brahmin, he must know the Shastras. Thakur, listen, did you hear that dream? Tell us who will win, will our Maharaja become a Sultan or not?"

The Sardar became excited as he spoke and gave the poor Brahmin a push that almost dislodged him from his seat. The little minstrel became still more annoyed.

"The devil take you and your dreams," he said gruffly. "I am off. I see I cannot stay here in peace." With these words he took up his sareng and trudged off.

"Stay Thakur," the Sardar called out "don't go away without explaining that dream to us."

"You have forgotten your turban, Thakur" shouted the barber, "come back and fetch it."

But the witty Moonshi topped them both with his remark. "Thakur," he called out, "come, get your turban. If any one strikes you on the head there will be nothing to ward off the blow. That little tuft of hair of yours won't protect you much."

All laughed and continued to pass jokes at the expense of the poor musician, excepting the physician, who only honoured the departing figure with a glance, then closed his eyes again and went on with his meditation. The Thakur took no notice of them, but went on doggedly till he was

out of sight. Then seating himself on the forked trunk of a tree, he played his sareng and sang to himself undisturbed, finishing his song this time.

"The Sravan month has come, the month of rain,
 The clouds are dense, like evening is the day.
 The rivers o'erflow, the rustling leaves complain,
 The rain-drops fall with melancholy play.
 The winds blow madly on with icy breath,
 And ever and anon the fiery lightnings flash,
 And silver showers glisten all around,
 When lo, the thunder roars with madd'ning crash,
 The way-worn traveller trembles in despair.
 And youth and maiden, full of glad delight,
 Are linked and linger in love's fond embrace.
 But I in lonely sorrow spent the night,
 I dreamt of lovers' meetings, raptures sweet,
 When up I started and with weeping eyes
 Beheld myself alone upon my couch,
 The distant thunder roared, deep were my sighs,
 Alas, alas, my love is far away."

CHAPTER XXVII.

The song was ended. The Brahmin put down his instrument and began softly to hum another tune. Suddenly he saw two bright eyes fixed on him from behind a Sefalika tree.. And then approached the figure of a woman, and said softly : "Salutation to the Thakur, what a beautiful song !"

The Brahmin looked up surprised, for the woman was young and fair, and in the forest she came upon him unseen like a woodsprite. He thought a forest fairy greet-

ed him and he could not find a word of reply.

"Do not stop, Thakur," said the same silvery voice, "Do let me hear another song." The vain old minstrel felt flattered, but his curiosity was uppermost and he wondered who she might be. The forest fairy was none other than the great-hearted heroine of this tale, Shaktimoi, and she had recognised the dramatist at first sight. Seven years had altered him but little, but her case was quite different. She had since grown from childhood into womanhood, and that is a great change.

"My fair lady, may I ask who you are?" he said.

"Can you not tell me by my dress? I am a beggar woman."

The Brahmin dropped his sareng, joined his hands in salutation and said, "Do not deceive me, you are the goddess of the forest," and he prepared to prostrate himself before her. But she became distressed to see his attitude and stopped him saying, "Thakur, it is not fitting that you a brahmin should make obeissance to me thus, I am a Kshatriya by caste. But I have no one belonging to me in the world, I am a beggar indeed."

The Brahmin replied, his voice still ringing with amazement, "I have seen many beggar women, but none like you, my lady."

Shakti thought it time to change the conversation, she therefore said quickly— "Thakur, won't you let me hear another

song? I am so fond of Nabin Adhikari's love-songs. Was not the one you were singing one of his compositions?"

If the little simple-hearted poet had been vain before, he now became half giddy with delight, and like an applauded schoolboy, he stammered, "I am Nabin Adhikari."

"Oh", she exclaimed, "are you that great man? Your name is known through the whole land. How fortunate I am to meet you here this evening, I have heard of you so much, but I hardly dared hope to meet you. Pray let me hear another song." And now the poet sang—

"Ah, does his soul still pine as mine for him ?
 And do his tears make the bright moonlight dim ?
 Does his fond heart still ache ? Do those twin stars,
 That seem lost in each other, hear him breathe
 Of absent love, like bird'mid prison bars ?
 Has he it still, that fragrant floral wreath
 I gave him, faded now and old ?
 Does he still fondle it with tear and sigh,,
 And press it to his lips with joy untold,
 Like happy mem'ries of fond days gone by ?
 Those bitter pangs of parting, do they rend
 His heart with anguish as in days of yore ?
 My heart responds, "Ah no, not so, my friend.
 All is forgetfulness upon that dreamy shore.
 There plays the flute in cadence ever new.
 The charms are gone, he thinks no more of you."

The Brahmin sang on prolonging the theme with many variations, Shakti listened with all her heart, for this was the song that touched her soul. Meanwhile the shades of evening had set. The winds had scattered the clouds and the atmosphere was

clear. The moon had risen in the beautiful autumn sky and quivered through the forest leaves ere it reached the earth. The sweet soft strain rose high and higher in the still moonlight till the song ended, and the singer turned to her who listened so attentively.

"Here is a song I love so dearly, is that one of yours too?" Shakti said with a stifled sigh. "Oh, beauteous night, with moonlight sweetly shining, if only he were here." I heard it from a mendicant the other day."

"Yes, that too is mine. You seem so fond of music, do you not sing yourself?"

"We, who live on alms, have to sing a little now and then."

"Will you not let me hear you?" asked the Thakur. "You need not be shy before me, my child, I am old enough to be your father."

"That is very true," said Shakti laughingly, "but then you are a great musician, and I am but a beggar maiden. Would it not be rather presumptuous on my part to sing before you? However, since you ask me, let me comply."

Shakti began very softly, but gradually raised her voice higher as she sang.

"Oh, beauteous night with moonlight sweetly shining,

If only he were here.

With untold longing my poor heart is pinning,

Ah, that his love were mine, who is so dear.

The spring is fair and mirth with beauty crowned,

The gay earth blooms and rings with merry sound,
My youth is fresh while all its charms abound,

Ah, that he might behold it !
 Ye gods, ye are all false, the world is vain,
 Why give this beauty which he may not see ?
 Since honeyed love is full o' bitter pain,
 Why all these sighs, this thirst that fetters me ?"

Only a poet knows the rapture of hearing his own melodies poured forth by one who knows music. The minstrel's heart grew large, his soul was like a sea flooded with moonlight. He felt himself transported to celestial portals, where being lives in song divine. He surely owed some gratitude to her who brought this bliss upon him.

"Mother, what service can I render you ?" he asked.

This was the question that the woodland fairy wished to hear. But she was wise and probed him ere she spoke. "I have renounced the world I am a Bhikharini I require nothing, oh Thakur. But I have one request. I wish to see the Raja or the Rani. I have some secret news to give them of the war." The musician reflected The Maharani had given the strictest orders that no sannyasini was to see her son.

"Can you not trust me with the message ?" he asked her.

"No, that I can not," she explained, "or I should have done so in the beginning."

The Brahmin mused a while and then replied : "I shall speak to my wife, she may see her way to bring this about. Be not afraid, but follow me."



SHAKTI IN THE DISGUISE OF A BEGGAR WOMAN.

She stood near a tent ;—the curtain was half drawn and what was the sight before her !

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Shakti had no wish to see either Nirupama or the Raja's mother, but she feared if she asked for Ganesh Dev only, she might arouse suspicion in the Thakur's mind. Hence this precaution.

She stood near a tent, the curtain was half drawn, and what was the sight before her? On a cot an infant slept, a boy of about two years of age, Ganesh, the father, reclined on the same couch, his head leaning upon his hand, his fond eye resting tenderly upon the child. She saw him bend low and kiss his sleeping son. Beside him stood his wife, the gentle Nirupama, her slender fingers moved through his soft hair, while with looks of deep devotion she smiled upon his manly face. Oh, scene of fond endearment, oh, Love Divine that gives such happiness to human kind, and yet the sorrow stricken Bhaktimayi a homeless waif stood there leaning against the canvas wall her heart bleeding, crushed, cold and insensible with despair. Each fond caress within, dealt one more wound unto her lacerated heart, each smile she saw, dripped poison in those wounds. Ah great Creator, must it be ever so? Must one be storm-tossed while another smiles? It has been thus; meanwhile the worlds roll on and hearts must break.

Rangini had gone inside bidding Shakti to wait till she returned. And now the

former came out again and asked her to enter, saying the Raja was ready to receive her, but she replied, "I must deliver my message to the Raja alone." Ask him to come here." Rangini entered the tent and presently the Raja came out.

"I hear you have some secret news about the war. You may speak safely here."

Shakti assumed an air of great mystery. "I cannot speak here," she said in a feigned voice, "will you come to the lake?" Not waiting for his answer she moved on and the Raja followed her.

Arrived at the lake, she threw back her veil and the moon revealed her beautiful face to him. But if that moon had suddenly dropped at his feet, Ganesh Dev could not have been more astounded. He stood transfixed, then recovering himself, he stepped aside and spoke contemptuously, "Mussalmani, why are you here?

These cruel words pierced the heart of the girl; and she felt her degradation as she had never felt it before. Yes, she had lost all claim to be called a Hindu, how dared she then approach the proud Maharaja of Dinajpore? But long suffering had given her strength and courage, so she took his rebuke unflinchingly and replied, "Rajkumar, I am still yours, heart, soul and body in faith and purity. But you spurn me anew, what other choice have I now left but a life of sin in the harem of a Mussalman?"

How strangely different this meeting from the last. Then in the quiet woods with her alone he had lost his whole nature in his love, but to-day he was calm and self-possessed, he stood before her as a judge, unmoved by emotion. "You have dwelt in the harem of a Mussalman, you can never be my wife. Banish that thought for ever from your mind. I have not the power to undo what you have done. I would have made you my wife, but you left me in scorn. I sought you in the early morning of the following day but to learn you had become the Begum of Gais-ud-din."

"Would you have made me your wife in defiance of your mother?"

"Yes."

Too late! Too late did Shakti see where she had failed. Ah, had she waited but a single day, all might have been well with her. At a time when all the fates had been against her and the very gods had called out, "He will never be yours," when her emotions had been stirred to their very depth, the girl had yielded to the inevitable, a force she could not have withstood if she had tried. Her heart wrung with remorse and she grew faint, all she could do was to utter a cry of despair, "Is there no hope for me?"

"Go to him whom you have chosen, he is your lawful refuge."

If her poor heart had had room for another wound, these cold, relentless words

might have stabbed deeper than all else that had lacerated her young life. As if was she stood in cold despair, there was no hope for her. Who could save her from the deep sea of affliction into which she had plunged herself by her own will? If the Raja attempted to do so, he would only sink with her. The very gods had not the power to intervene—to take away the curse of her own deeds. She realised this. She had lost everything save her pride, which through all her trials she had retained. But now she was like a mariner in a stormy night who has lost his way at sea with chart and compass gone. Pride, strength and will to stand forsook her of a sudden, and the strong girl wept tears of blood, each sob burst from her like a mad cry. "Ah, Prince, do not abandon me in disgrace. How can I dwell with one to whom I cannot give my heart? Heed not the world, but lift your soul high. Before the gods our union will not be a sin."

The man's heart was deeply touched, yet he was helpless and remained speechless before her grief. At last he said gently, "Listen, Shakti, did I wish a thousand times I could not give you a home. Even if I sacrificed my life, I could not do so. For it would be wrong, unjust and sinful. You are now married and another man's wife—".

"No, Rajkumar, no, I am not married. Spurn me not. If you cannot marry me, at

least give me your protection. Oh force me not into a life of shame."

Ganesh Dev's manly heart was stirred, he felt deeply for the girl in her sorrow, yet firmly he replied : "Try to be calm, Shakti, and let reason appeal to you. What you desire can never be. Our paths must now remain separated. Although you are not married to him as yet, still you belong to him. If I take you from him, both your honour and mine would be sullied. You went to him of your own will and legally as well as morally you are his. How can I steal a husband's lawful right? A tie that is not built on righteousness, cannot endure. The husband is the woman's natural protector, to him alone she owes her duty, and her very religion is centered in him. Devote yourself to him with all your heart, strive to do your duty, and you will get strength to bear your life, God will help you in your attempt."

But Shakti failed to see the justice of this wise counsel. She felt rejected as a worthless one, and her soul trembled with despair at this terrible thought, but with it her lost pride returned and asserted itself. And when she spoke again her voice was grave and her eyes tearless.

"Shame on your name, Ganesh Dev, that you thought I appeared before you as a degraded one. I came to you as my protector, to preserve my purity, my honour. But you fear the world more than you

desire to save me from my fate. Then let me cast to the winds all that has moved my heart and do what you call right and what the world calls honour. But bear in mind if there is sin in this, it is not mine, but his who forced me into it."

The maiden turned and disappeared. But Ganesh Dev lingered long by the still waters of the moonlit lake.

* * * *

Gais-ud-din returning victor from the field made ready to receive his bride and she awaited him, now no longer dressed as a devotee. Decked in her bridal robes, bejewelled like a queen, she greeted him. The Sultan laid his crown down at her feet and said, "Beloved, I lay a kingdom at your feet. Deign to wear this crown and receive your slave." The woman's heart still bled, but yielded to the man's embrace, and pale lips faltered, "I am yours."

That very evening the rite was performed that made Shaktimayi the Sultan's wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The State of Dinajpore was at peace. With the death of Sultan Sekander Shah, the rebellion came to an end. The Raja of Dinajpore formed a friendly alliance with the new Sultan, and he was now at leisure to see to the well-being of his subjects. Whatever the war had destroyed was being

restored. New forts, new buildings and new gardens came into existence. The Raja himself made good the losses sustained by the people during the war, and soon all was so far restored that there were only the dead to mourn. The year and a half of war seemed like a far off bad dream and the people enjoyed the new prosperity.

A new garden had been laid out near the palace by the river-side, and through it the people passed on their way to bathe in the river. It was a bright summer morning. The palace musicians were playing a Bhairabee* tune and a young gardener hummed it as he went on with his work. A young Fakir, dressed in red, plucked flowers from a tree near by. He seemed to be listening to the sound of a drum at a distance. One of the passers-by, noticed his saintly appearance and wished to consult him about his child who lay ill at home. Another who had likewise tried to speak to him, looked at the Fakir critically and then shook his head significantly.

The first man noticing this, said eagerly "You seem to know the Fakir, do take me to him, I beseech you. I have made offerings to five pirs† and offered a goat to Kali, but my child is not yet well."

A third broke in suddenly, "How the drums are beating ! Is it new moon to-day,

* A tune played in the morning.

† Mahomedan Saint, to whom the lower class of the Hindus in Bengal make offering as well as the Mahomedans.

are we having Kali Poojah*? I never hear a drum beat without recalling that day when we were called to arms against the Badshah. Oh, how the drums beat that day," and the speaker sighed.

"But those were glorious times," replied the fourth, "how patriotism stirred the heart! One would have died a hundred deaths just to kill a single enemy. What a wild goose chase we led those fellows."

"Yes," said another, "and if they had held out a few days longer things would have been reversed. It was lucky they left of their own accord, we had no rations and could never have held out. But how loudly the drums are beating."

Meanwhile the first speaker addressing the second said, "Why did you shake your head so mysteriously when you saw the Fakir? Tell me what you know about him."

"You won't repeat it, on your honour? Give me your word."

"I promise."

"That is no Fakir," replied the other in a low voice, "it is Prince Saheb-ud-din."

The listener became excited and the pledge of secrecy on his honour was temporarily forgotten. "Saheb-ud-din, our Sultan's nephew?" he called out loudly.

The secret was out. One said, "Has he not been killed by his uncle?"

* Annual festival in honour of Kali.

"No", came the reply from one who knew, "the seven brothers have been slain, and now the new Sultan is seeking this lad in order that he may kill him also. But he escaped and is taking refuge with our Raja."

"How do you know all this?"

"My wife serves Adhikari Thakur's wife as a maid, and she heard it from her; so it must be true."

"Then it is up with us. Those drums mean nothing but a call to arms. Kanai Sardar, you wished for fight, well it has come, we'll see blood flow again."

"But", replied the man whose mind was on his sick child at home, "who will fight? I have lost one son, and his mother followed him broken-hearted. My other boy is dying. Who is left to fight?"

"You must be mad, can't the Raja fight without your wife and sons? Aren't there men enough left in the land without your two boys?"

"Well, you fight away, if you like. But we will go to the Maharaja and give him our advice. Thousands of men cannot be sacrificed to save the life of one. Let him give up Saheb-ud-din to the Sultan."

"You think yourself very wise. Do you think the Raja will heed your advice?"

"If not, we will speak to the Rani mother. When she comes to the river to perform her

poojah,* we will fall at her feet and say, "Save us, mother, save us, or else put your foot on us and kill us now".

"This is certain, if the Badshah once gets hold of the lad, he will put him to death. He will have no mercy on the poor lad."

"And our Maharaja is mercy itself, a very Yudhishtir."†

Thus talking they arrived at the ghat.

CHAPTER XXX.

The people were right in their surmises. Ganesh Dev had given refuge to Prince Saheb-ud-din, and the matter had been kept as quiet as possible. Gais-ud-din had got wind of it, however, and had sent Kutab to Dinajpore to search for the fugitive. It was the drum of Kutab's troops, marching towards the capital of Dinajpore, that these men on their way to the river had heard. Now Ganesh Dev found himself between the horns of a dilemma. Either he must give up a friend who had sought his protection or involve himself in war which would mean ruin to his State. The Sannasini advised him to take up arms if necessary. It was his duty to protect the persecuted even at the risk of losing all, she argued.

* Worship.

† A King of ancient India who was noted for truthfulness and rectitude.

Ganesh Dev's mother on the other hand opposed the idea. She argued that his first duty was the interest of his State, and if one stood in the path of duty, that one should be removed. Saheb-ud-din must be given up at once.

Ganesh Dev did not share his mother's views, they were to him incompatible with justice and conscience. Prince Saheb-ud-din saved him at the time Sekander Shah had imprisoned him, and did he not owe him protection for this service? The future is always uncertain, and he could not out of fear of possible defeat sacrifice a life which he had promised to protect, that would be submitting conscience to brute force. He had pledged his word of honour and must keep it, be the consequences what they may. These were the principles on which Ganesh Dev's character was built up.

He had never yet forgotten Shakti's sad fate, and his heart told him that he was not entirely free from responsibility in the matter. There was a voice within him which said that he had let the world's opinion guide him when this forsaken woman pleaded for his protection. And if war came, as come it must, if he persisted in his course, this perhaps was the retribution heaven had brought upon him for having abandoned a lonely woman to a fate she loathed? He would not commit wrong twice. Saheb-ud-din had sought

refuge at his hand, he would not abandon him. If he must perish in the attempt, then perhaps he might expiate the crime he had committed against Shaktimayi. But now he heard in his heart the cry of an innocent people, suffering for their ruler's sin. The man of sensitive conscience knew not which way to turn, he therefore assembled the leading men of his Raj and laid the case before them.

At the assembly he informed them of the impending danger. He rose to his feet, and as he did so the whole assembly rose and remained standing while he spoke. "My children," he said, "we have been delivered from our past calamities, but now another confronts us. The Sultan does not feel secure although he has slain his seven brothers. He now wants the life of his unhappy nephew. This lad sought refuge in my house, and I gave it. If I give him up, I shall outrage the law laid down in our Shastras, which enjoins us to shelter those who seek our protection; if I continue to protect him, war is imminent, and in that case my people will suffer. Advise me, I know not which course to choose,"

From the assembly rose a unanimous cry, "We shall bow to the decision of our Maharaja, he is our father, our protector. Are we not his children and humble servants? Whatever he deems best and commands us to do, that will we do."

When these loud vows of loyalty had sub-

sided, one of the nobles of the land came forward and said in calm, clear accents, "Maharaja, since you encourage us to speak freely, let me say on behalf of my brethren and myself what we think. Prince Saheb-ud-din, forsaken and destitute, sought refuge with your Highness, and it is your duty to protect him. But there is another duty and a higher one, the duty to protect your children. The land is suffering still from the effects of the last war. The question is, would it be right to overwhelm the land again with grief, kill thousands of your people for the sake of one foreigner?"

The whole assembly shouted, and one said, "Long live our Maharaja. May he protect his children. Let them not be sacrificed for the sake of one stranger."

With this view all assembled seemed to coincide. "May prosperity be yours, Maharaja, for you we would leave our lives a thousand times, but why should we die for a Mussalman?"

Another said, "May the Maharaja be victorious. I gave four sons in the last war and have but one left now to support me, and I am old and blind. However, if your Highness says so, he too shall go and fight, and I will gladly remain childless in my old age. But would you to protect one stranger bring death on thousands of your sons?"

When all who wished had spoken, the Raja spoke once more and said, "Listen, my sons. You are right, a father must think of

the welfare of his children before aught else. But their material well-being is not his only care. To teach them duty, virtue and how to lead a noble life shou'd be his highest aim. If I abandon a friend who once helped me when I needed help, your honour and my own will be stained. Not only shall we break the Shastric law of giving refuge to the helpless, but repay a great service rendered with base ingratitude. You all know that when the late Sultan Sekander Shah, sought an alliance with me and called me to his council, Prince Saheb-ud-din was left as hostage for my safety. But when the Sultan broke his faith and imprisoned me, General Azim Khan, by two of our soldiers, managed to send the news to our camp. It was Prince Saheb-ud-din who hastened to the Court and liberated us. If in the face of this we abandon him to his fate shall we be acting as men of honour should? Shall we not become guilty of the basest ingratitude? If my own blood sufficed to ensure your happiness, your honour and your virtue, how gladly would I not give it for you. My only sorrow is that I must sacrifice your lives with mine. Still it is not for me in reality you fight but for a just cause. It is no question of a foreigner, a Mussalman, it is a question solely of honour. This war will be a holy war, for it will aid the weak and innocent, it will repay friendship with friendship, gratitude for service rendered. Death in this war will mean a noble precedent to posterity and

harbinger of peace in the world to come. We also must die, that is the law, then why shrink from yielding up this transient life for a just cause?"

The Raja's noble precepts inflamed the hearts of those who heard.

"Jai* jai to our Maharaja, he is king Yudhishtir reincarnated."

"We will fight for him."

"We will die in this holy war."

"Long life to our Maharaja."

Such were the exclamations that rose from the agitated assembly. When the excitement subsided, the Raja spoke again. "My sons, not a hair of your heads shall be hurt in vain. I will first speak to the Sultan to obtain Prince Saheb-ud-din's pardon. I will offer myself to the Sultan as security that the Prince will do no harm, and I shall ask for him a Governorship in a remote province. If the Sultan refuses to accede to these proposals, then only shall we fight, but not until then." The question next arose as to what would happen if the young Prince should break faith. To this Ganesh replied, "I know Prince Saheb-ud-din to be an honourable man, he fears to do wrong. I am certain he will not break faith, will not at any time rebel against the Badshah. But if after the Sultan's death, he should aspire to the throne, I should certainly help him, if I live."

The assembly were satisfied and signified

* Victory.

assent. 'That very afternoon the Raja of Dinajpore laid his proposals before Kutab, who grew furious and characterised the conduct of the young Raja as audacious. He threatened him with destruction, to which the latter calmly replied, "Be it so. But you will have to kill me before taking the Sultan's nephew. You will never get him as long as I am alive."

CHAPTER XXXI.

Ganesh Dev firmly believed that in protecting the young Prince he was doing right, so the prospect of war gave him neither anxiety nor remorse. His only thought was to overcome despotic oppression, and if blood was shed in such a cause, it was well shed.

After the assembly had adjourned, he went into the inner apartment, his mind still occupied with the thoughts of the event that was to come. Nirupama greeted him and then informed him that his mother was displeased because refuge was still granted to the Prince.

"What do you think of the matter?" he asked in reply, "have I done right or wrong in giving him shelter?"

"You have done right," the young wife said enthusiastically. "If a Raja would cease to protect the helpless and subdue oppression, what would then be the fate

of the country? You have acted as your noble and generous heart prompted you to act."

He raised her hand to his lips and said, "Beloved, you have spoken like a true woman."

Nirupama's tender heart became filled with delight, she drooped her pretty lashes, but presently she spoke again. She had an important piece of news to tell her husband. "Have you heard what is being said?" she asked. "You remember Shakti, of course. She has become Gais-ud-din's Begum."

"Really?"

"Had you not heard it before? The report comes from Kutab's tent, and so it cannot be false. How horrible to become Mussalman for the sake of wealth and power."

This contemptuous allusion stung Ganesh deeply. Did he not know all? How fallacious the world's judgment? This sad young life had entered the Mussalman's harem as a burning sacrifice, and now the world's unrelenting censure was added to her lot. It would, however, have been unwise to tell the truth to Nirupama, he therefore only said, "Do not judge her, you do not know what her motives were. And after all, why should we despise the Mussalmans. Are they not the sons of our motherland as well as we ourselves? The only difference is our creed. Why should we consider ourselves so very superior?"

"I cannot say why it is, but I despise them. I would not become a Mussalmani even to gain heaven". Little Nigupama, although she knew it not, was in her childish way expressing the general sentiment of her people.

"You are wrong in cherishing such feeling," replied her husband gravely. "If we entertain such sentiment, can we be surprised that they in their turn despise us? The true glory of our Hindu faith has always been in its spirit of toleration. You pride yourself on being a Hindu, but you ignore the key-note of the Hindu teaching, which enjoins us to condemn no creed, but treat them all with respect."

The little Maharani was convinced of the truth implied in her husband's words, she became confused and only shyly answered, "But if Shakti were to come here, I could not meet her on equal terms."

"It would be condescension on her part to meet you as her equal. She is the Sultana of Bengal, and you are only one of her many subject Ranis."

The young wife felt mortified. Her old jealousy for the beautiful companion of her childhood made itself felt once more, and jealousy always hears a great deal more than is being said. She put her own interpretation upon his words, her pride was hurt. But she was meek and gently faltered, "You are right."

At that moment some one knocked at the

door. It was Rangini, who informed the Raja that the Bhagavati sannyasini wished to see His Highness. The Raja himself rose to admit her, and the priestess entered. She had sad news to tell. "Your mother," she said to the Raja, "has told Kutab Prince Saheb-ud-din's whereabouts. I fear he is a prisoner by this time. See what is to be done, make haste, there can be no delay."

Ganesh Dev became agitated and said. "I thank you for the information, holy mother. You may tell the captain of the guards to bring troops to my assistance as soon as possible. In the meantime I will take as many of the palace guards as are available and advance."

He delayed not a minute but set out with as many of the soldiers as he could muster at the moment. If he could check Kutab till reinforcement came, all would be well. He was a high-spirited youth, this young Raja of Dinajpore, and the inspiration of defending justice gave him great strength and dauntless courage. Supported by a handful of soldiers, he faced an overwhelming force. But his attempts were futile. He could not save the young fugitive whom he had granted protection. That very night Ganesh Dev and Prince Saheb-ud-din were taken prisoners by Kutab's soldiers.

CHAPTER XXXII.

There was a villa by the river side, surrounded by a garden of exquisite delights. The Ganga's rippling waves kissed the green shrubbery growing by the water's edge, and all was fragrance, beauty, peace and happiness. Softly murmuring fountains sent their silver spray on high, and a lotus-covered artificial lake wound its way through beds with rose and jasmine laden. The statuary spoke of Hindu myths, and marble figures of the gods and heroes of the Aryan lore lined the winding pathways. Here a graceful Radhika, there Krishna played his flute, and shaded under yonder Champak tree Saraswati played the vina, while round the lotus seat of Lakshmi soft tendrils wound, and near a spraying fountain stood Sakuntala the beautiful, robed in a dress of bark, and earthen vessel in one hand and with the other fondling a young deer that lingered by her side, and Ratnavali the lovestricken, stood with bent head before King Udayan, her lover.

On yonder marble balustrade a peacock stood with his proud head erect, the shining feathers of his sweeping tail touching the bow of Cupid. And in a silver lake girdled with lilies swam among the lotus stems two snow-white swans, gliding on dreamily. Their domed wings and gracefully curved necks looked as if carved of marble. Gold fishes disported in silver basins, flitting

here and there like shining rays. Bright-feathered parrots bound by golden chains sat chatting in the branches, and wood doves cooed in foliage-laden cages, while bulbuls whistled in the trees. A snow-white doe lay browsing in the grass, and the tall palm trees rustled their mysterious sound, that seemed like an echo from an unseen world.

And in this place of beauty sat the Sultana, Shaktimayi, now Empress of the land. She did not live among the other wives, her royal husband gave this place to her. And though their faiths differed he gladly granted her representations from the Hindu myths, left her her own religious worship, and saw that every wish of hers was granted.

But was the Empress happy? She was still beautiful, her form was slender and her queenly face as fair and youthful as ever. But sadness lingered in her midnight eyes, the very smile upon her lips breathed sorrow. The young deer came and softly touched her hand, he was accustomed to take food from her. She smiled and stroked his slender neck.

She loved to linger amid the flowers and the waving trees, they brought some solace to her aching heart. For while around her all was beauty, her soul was weary, the great pain of her life still lingered in her heart, and she knew neither joy nor peace.

She courted loneliness and often sat for hours and gazed.

Now evening came and the pale lunar disc rose slowly in the vaulted sky, the wind whispered through the branches and the silver wavelets murmured at her feet. They told her of a childhood bright and happy, of a life's love and bitter sorrow, they whispered of a garland crushed and faded, and the Sultana sighed. It was the winter season when the days are pleasant but the nights are cold with a sharp cutting chill. Shakti retired to a spacious garden hall attached to the palace which laden with foliage and flowers, and decorated with fountains and statuary, was like a garden in itself. A figure approached, her dream was interrupted. But oh, the change that came over those beautiful features! She became irritable, she did not return his greeting. "What is this I hear?" she exclaimed angrily, "Prince Saheb-ud-din has been made prisoner to be put to death? Shame on me, to have married such a cruel man!"

The Sultan was surprised to find her so soon this evening, for as a rule he had to wait for a long time when he came to see her. For this was the hour when her child, her little girl, was being put to rest for the night and Shakti spent her time then with the little one. The fact was she was anxious to see him to-night, for she had heard of the imprisonment of his nephew,

and she wanted to hear from his own lips whether this was true. But he saw soon that she was in no mood to receive his oft-repeated vows of love. Seating himself on the soft couch beside her, he replied. "Is he more cruel than the woman of his heart! Have I not placed at your feet all that can make life dear? And yet you will not yield yourself to me, you call me cruel, because I must slay a foe."

Shakti could have endured ill-treatment from her husband, but his vows of love, his caresses filled her with repulsion. She said coldly, "You are slaying an innocent lad, simply because you fear he may be dangerous to you at some future time. Is this the heroism of a Mussalman? The blood of your seven brothers is already calling out against you, but not satisfied with that, you must put to death an innocent child. This proves a coward's heart."

"Perhaps your Hindu heroes did not know of the jewel they lost in you, otherwise why did they allow a coward to win you? It seems cowardice won, while heroism failed." Her husband occasionally revenged himself on her with a taunt of this kind. Shakti's face flushed with anger, because she felt his words were true. She picked a flower from a branch near her hand and crushed it with her slender fingers. Meanwhile the fountains played and leaves and flowers filled the room with fragrance. But Shakti knew it not, her eyes cast looks of scorn and

sadness mingled. The bright light of the chandelier shone full upon her face, the Sultan gazed at her and then exclaimed, "Beloved of my soul, your beauty overpowers me, you drive me from your side, but I cannot leave you," and then he kissed her passionately.

She had been the Sultan's wife for five years now, but she avoided his caresses as much as she possibly could. Today they seemed more cruel to her than ever, she shuddered and her heart turned cold within her. "Ganesh Dev, what have you done? If I live to-day, it is to accomplish my revenge," these were the thoughts the closed lips concealed.

A maid appeared carrying a little girl who cried violently. "I cannot keep the Princess quiet, your majesty," she explained, "so I have brought her here." The child ran to the mother, and still sobbing said, "I want to stay with you. I will not go away again."

Shakti dismissed the maid and taking the child on her lap, kissed her little face, but the child scrambled down saying, "you naughty mama, you left me, I shall go to papa," and then she climbed upon her father's knee.

Shakti's bitter mood gave way to motherly tenderness, her anger changed to pitiful despair. The man for whom she cared so little was after all the father of her child. She could not, however hard she might try,

destroy this bond. How terrible her fate! The father plucked some flowers and gave them to the child. The little one chatted and laughed as she played with them and threw them into the basin of a fountain. Shakti's sad gaze lingered on the child's happy face, her heart burnt with agony. The father kissed the little one and then turned to the mother saying, "Beloved, it is for the sake of this child, that I slay my enemies, otherwise who would protect her and you when I am dead?"

"That cannot exonerate you in shedding the blood of an innocent boy!"

"His very helplessness is his strength. Many will flock around him on that account and the kingdom will never be at rest."

"Still slay not the innocent, that is not the justice befitting a king. No blame attaches to the boy, in hiding in fear of his life, he has done no wrong. If you fear a rebellion, punish the guilty, punish him who gave shelter to the fugitive against your command."

The Sultan was amazed. He knew she loved Ganesh Dev still, and he could not understand her mind. He knew not the dividing line between worshiper's love and desire for revenge. Her speech, however, pleased him and he replied, "Ganesh Dev is a prisoner."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, for more than a month."

The child heard this and in her sweet

babbling voice called out, "I broke Ganesh. Sundar Lal gave it to me, but it was so ugly."

Sweet innocent child, how little she knew what moved her mother's heart. The gardener had given her a clay image of the god Ganesh, the elephant-headed, but it pleased her not, and she broke it.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Prince Saheb-ud-din was prisoner, and his fate was discussed at the assembly. The Sultan himself was not present. Kutab was in favour of having the young Prince killed, for this alone, he argued, would procure the peace of the Empire. The other members of the council were not of his opinion. They requested him to intercede for the boy with the Sultan, since excepting the Sultana, the Badshah listened so readily to no one as to Kutab. He, however, put on a piteous air and persuaded his fellow counselors that he was no longer in the Sultan's favour. Azim Khan, who was a just and sincere man, and who was moreover indebted to Prince Saheb-ud-din for his life, was incensed at Kutab's attitude. Impatient and angry, he exclaimed, "It was we who rebelled against the late Sultan and placed Gais-ud-din on the throne. If this tyranny continues and the Prince is not released, I myself will fight for him."

To this Kutab replied in tones of despair, "How would that help the matter? Whatever we may do, we cannot save the Prince's life. If we rebel, we may add our own to his. The country no longer belongs to the Badshah, it is governed by that she-devil, the Sultana."

The assembly agreed with him, all cursed the Queen as the promoter of the Sultan's evil deeds. Kutab had won his point, this was what he had wanted to accomplish in order to have his own actions appear justified. He hated Shaktimayi for the influence she had over her husband. He thought she supplanted him in the Emperor's favour. As a matter of fact, Shakti never troubled herself about matters of state. But if the Sultan at any time differed from Kutab, then woe betide the poor Sultana, for Kutab laid all the blame on her and cursed her inwardly.

A few days ago he had arrested several way-farers and had them mercilessly flogged in the compound of the palace because they had not saluted him properly on the road. The little Princess, Gul Bahar, had witnessed this and running weeping to her mother, told her what she had seen. Shakti had the matter investigated, but could not get at the truth. She was told their offence lay in having tried to enter the royal palace over night while intoxicated. The Empress, however, succeeded in having them pardoned, and even had one of them, Sunder

Lal, installed as one of the gardeners in her palace garden. Kutab became infuriated, but he concealed his feeling and praised the Sultana's kindness of heart to the Sultan, while to the courtiers he represented himself as having saved the poor men from the Sultana's ill treatment.

He feared the child might work him further harm by her innocent disclosures, so one day he advised the Emperor to keep the Princess confined in the Zenana, since now she was growing up. The Sultan agreed, and yet no change ensued. He knew that this was due to her mother's influence, but was powerless to act further in the matter and had to keep quiet. But when he imagined her influence made itself felt even in state affairs, his power of endurance came to an end. He resolved to check her, and in order to gain a point, he advised Gais-ud-din to slay his nephew. He was surprised to see that the Sultan, who had first wanted to see the young Prince killed, had now changed his mind. He saw the Queen's hand in this. He therefore impressed on him the more urgently the necessity of removing Saheb-ud-din from his path, pointing out how dangerous he might become if he were allowed to live. On the other hand, he agreed with the Badshah in making peace with the Maharaja of Dinajpore and keeping on friendly terms with him. This too was done to spite the Sultana, because he knew she had no good

feeling towards Ganesh Dev. He assured the king that Ganesh Dev could be relied upon if he once gave his word.

"But the question is," put in the Sultan, "what will happen if he refuses to give his word. In that case I shall be obliged to have him put to death. Saheb-ud-din will be helpless without his support. He can be left free if once the Maharaja is dead."

At any other time Kutab would have agreed with his view, but thinking the counsel came from the Sultana and blinded by rage, he insisted on Saheb-ud-din's death. He yearned to have his jealous hatred satisfied, and he thought he saw a chance to overthrow the Queen's influence and establish his own.

Ill-starred Shaktimayi, how little she knew of the treachery that surrounded her! Unconscious of Kutab's evil deeds and feelings, she still imagined him to be her friend. He had helped her on the occasion when at the close of the war she had seen Ganesh Dev for the last time, and she had trusted him implicitly ever since. But his motive had been black then as all his motives were. He hoped that she would not return, or if she did, that by this act of hers he would have her in his power. But since she did come back and became Queen, he ever planned to disclose the secret to her husband. Only the fear of becoming implicated himself had so far

prevented him from doing so. But now another opportunity offered.

The unsuspecting woman sent for Kutab, and told him she wished to visit Ganesh Dev in his cell. His heart beat high with fiendish delight, when he heard this. He bowed his obeisance to her, avowed his loyalty anew and assured her that he would gladly give his life for her, and since what she asked of him was such a trifling service, how gladly would he not manage it.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Ganesh Dev lay on the floor of his cell, haggard, weary and forlorn, gazing vacantly through the small prison hole at the starlit sky above.

In her royal apartment Shaktimoi decked her fair form with choicest robes. Dressed like a Queen as on her bridal day, she now was ready. Ready to go whither? To the prison cell where lay the man she once had loved, who had spurned her, refused her hand and brought disgrace upon her life. No more in the sannyasini's garb would she appear before him. No, she came to triumph over him, he should behold her in her glory now. Ah! did he still recall those words that in the silent woodland she had spoken, did he recall the scene when by the moonlit lake she pleaded for mercy for the last time? Behold Ganesh, the curse has

fallen, the hour of vengeance is at hand, a blighted life is vindicated. It is for you now to ask favour from her hand, it rests with her to give you life or death.

And as he lay alone upon the ground, the Maharaja's heart was heavy. That evening messengers had brought the King's proposals which might set him free. On no account must he at any time take arms against the Sultan, and he must support his King at any call and question not whether the cause be right or wrong. To these conditions he must give his oath. The man of noble blood refused, and now the doom must fall. Still death was better than a life of servitude. His whole nature rebelled at the mere thought that such proposals should have been made to him. It is well to die in a right cause, and he feared not death, but his heart was heavy with the thought of those he left behind. He thought of wife and child now at the mercy of a cruel foe and of his faithful subjects, who would soon be scattered and oppressed. This was the last hour of his life, yet there was no one near to comfort him, no friend, no gentle voice, no tender hand to soothe his throbbing brow. He could not realise it that death was so near. His faith in the Divine was unshaken, he trusted still. Some miracle, he thought, would save him yet for those who needed him. Impatiently he struck his hand against a wall, but only the dead

echo answered back, and the great pain that gnawed his heart told him he was in bondage still. He smiled at his own folly. Then he thought of the cānniyasini, would she not come to help him, surely she was working for his freedom now. He fought for a just cause, could then the just God let him die, leaving helpless all those who leaned on him for protection and support? And now into his mental vision entered Shaktimoi, he heard her pleading voice, the cry for mercy that had rent her breast. Had she not pleaded for protection in a just cause? Remorse took hold of him with all its bitter force. No, no, his doom was sealed, he worked his own destruction on that night when coldly he refused to shelter her from harm. His hope gave way to melancholy, he was exhausted and of sheer weariness he fell asleep. And as he slept he dreamt a dream. He thought the four walls of his prison chamber vanished and in the open field under the starry sky appeared a goddess. Joy filled his soul, he was about to worship at her feet when a slight noise disturbed his sleep. Was this an apparition? Had then a goddess appeared to liberate him? Opening his eyes he saw before him a fair woman robed in jewelled raiment whose radiance lit up his dreary cell. This filled his soul with holy awe and he knew not whether he still dreamt or not.. *

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The prison cell was dark. When Shakti entered she saw nothing save the impenetrable darkness. She bid the warder bring a light, while she stood motionless. She closed her eyes and found the darkness less intense when presently she opened them again. A dim light fell through the opening in the wall and that enabled her to see a dark figure prostrate on the ground. She advanced towards it. But now the prisoner started in wild surprise, "Shakti?" his voice sounded like an echo from a tomb, a whole soul's woe rang forth from those two syllables,

"Not Shakti, but the Sultana," sharp, clear and cold rang her tones, the very walls seemed hurt when reverberating those mocking sounds, and the man to whom they were addressed lay motionless and silent. The Empress too was silent, she tried to pierce the gloom and see the Raja's face. She wished to see the effect her words had on him. But the darkness was merciful, she did not see the woe that marred his features.

The warder entered with a lamp and retired leaving it behind shutting the door after him. She could see the handsome youth distinctly. But he saw her early life, nor the that she remembered Raja dressed in royal robes proud and stately wherever he appeared. to whom

She only now beheld a sorry figure, a sad-looking prisoner clad in rags, his long hair dishevelled and his face pale, haggard, worn and sorrow-stricken. Only the fire still lingered in those black eyes, now deep and sunken, and by that she recognised the man of Kshatriya blood.

She gazed speechlessly at him, not a trace in her proud face betrayed her feeling. This was her hour of triumph, of revenge. Did she feel joy? A change came over the magic pallor of her face, a tear-drop glistened in her long black lashes, her closed lips quivered. Firm and erect she stood, it seemed as if life stirred within a marble statue. His calamity smote her. Ye gods, behold the woman's heart and marvel. As if touched by a magic wand her being changed, or did not change but burst the crust of bitterness that coated the chords on which the woman's noble nature vibrated.

Yes, now she understood what the Yogini had told her, her being was reclaimed. This was indeed her hour of triumph, for she had gained her higher self again. At last she spoke, "Rise Rajkumar." Now her tones

were mellow, compassionate and tender, Ganesh Dev was astounded at the change. How bold he, a mere man, fathom the depth of God's heart which even the gods have failed to. Tushakti spoke again, "Rise Rajkumar, the tushakti spoke again, "Rise and cover yourself. Take these garments and cover yourself. Take these Ganesh understood. Sita with them."

had come to

set him free. Had then his dream come true? Again the vision of freedom loomed before him, he found himself unfettered, moving amid those he loved. Mechanically he rose and said blankly, "Where shall I go?"

Shakti extinguished the dim light and hastily tore off a part of her voluminous sari, she took the gold embroidered shawl from off her head and these she gave the prisoner and said, "Take these garments Rajkumar, cover yourself well and knock at the door; the warder will open. Then go out and accompany him in silence. When outside the prison give the guard this ring, he will take it and leave you unmolested and you can go wherever you like."

The Raja as if dreaming still, replied, "And you?"

"Do not concern yourself about me," replied the Sultana hastily. "All has been arranged, Kutab will come for me at the appointed time."

"But the guard will tell Kutab you have already gone."

"The man who goes with you will be relieved by another man, who will know nothing of what went on."

"His companion will tell him."

"No, believe me all has been arranged. Make haste, do not delay, or all will fail."

Was all arranged? Ah noble, fearless woman, well may the angels bless you for this one falsehood from your lips. She only thought of him; the dangers that awaited

her, the mortal risk she ran this hour, these found no place in her thought.

The freeborn man breathed liberty once more. But suddenly as if a revelation came upon him, the light of freedom vanished.

"Sultana," clear and firm rang his words, "I will not escape. Take back your garments and the ring."

Wounded and astonished the Sultana asked, "Why not, Maharaja?"

"I am not worthy of the gift you offer me. I cannot take my freedom from your hand." His voice was firm and resolute. Shakti knew his resolution was fixed, her face turned ghastly pale, her last hope fled. She leaned against a wall to save herself from falling.

While this went on within the prison cell, Kutab sought the Sultan and worked on his fierce jealousy. He whispered into the King's ears all that by his false vows of loyalty he had been able to learn.

The Badshah became mad with rage. "Kutab, this cannot be. This is too much, you are speaking falsely." The unfortunate man was like one whose reason had forsaken him.

But Kutab answered complacently, "Your Majesty may perhaps trust the evidence of your own eyes. If you will come, I shall soon prove that what I say is true."

"That I cannot do. If what you say is true, go at once and bring me that head."

"Whose head, your Majesty?"

"Whose head? That villain? Ganesh Dev's."

"And what will I say to the Sultana?"

"You have nothing to say to her, that is my concern."

Kutab was crushed; he had hoped to see the Sultana either killed or banished, but his game was lost.

He departed despondently to carry out orders, when he was recalled. "If the Sultana has not left the prison, the prisoner is not to be slain now, you understand?"

"As your Majesty orders," and Kutab turned away dejectedly.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Shakti was dazed, her hope lay broken at her feet. Never before in her sad life had she been pained as she was by Ganesh Dev's refusal to-night. Many had been the disappointments that she had seen, but this was the greatest. It was not like the passion of old days, when anger and vindictiveness had come to her assistance. To-night her heart was free from any selfish thought. She felt as if a mountain of sorrow had suddenly crushed her; she felt a sense of absolute aloofness. Her despair was abyssmal, it seemed she had lost all connection with the universe, like the doomsday comet isolated from the solar

system.' She could not realise that what she heard was really true.

She left the cell and coming out saw the sky overcast with clouds, not a single star penetrated the darkness. She stood like one in a trance, all seemed black and hopeless to her, she could not grasp the situation in which she found herself. The watchman, thinking she was afraid, offered to bring a light. His voice startled her and she replied very slowly, "No--o, let us go."

The jemadar*, Golam Ali Khan, sat smoking on a wooden seat in the outer gateway and as Shakti passed the patrol challenged her. "Your name," they called. The jemadar silenced them and they let her pass. But as she went he ran after her hastily and demanded, "The ring?"

Kutab had given Shakti a ring by which she had been permitted entrance into the prisoner's cell. It had been agreed between them that Kutab should wait for her at the guard house near by, and that on leaving the prison, she was to send the ring by the jemadar to Kutab, who would then come to her and see that she returned to the palace in safety.

In the meantime, as the reader knows, Kutab was not wasting his time in the guard-house, yet he had not neglected to make arrangements whereby he should know when Shakti left the prison. He had left one of his servants with Golam Ali Khan,

* Constable.

instructing the latter to send him, with the ring immediately after the woman left the prison, in case Kutab could not return before that time. He fully intended to be back before the Sultana left the cell, but it was possible that there might be some delay, since the Sultan had to be roused from his bed before the news could be imparted to him. So considering the matter all around, Kutab had taken this precaution. He had, however, concealed the fact that she who entered the prison was the Sultana.

"There is no ring to give," replied Shakti to the jemadar's demand. But the man insisted on having Kutab's orders carried out, to which she firmly replied, "Step aside, you are hearing your Sultana's orders."

Frightened and abashed the man stepped aside, and the Empress passed unhindered, while the poor constable returned to his seat quite unnerved over what had occurred. "The Sultana Sahib?" he muttered to himself. "I thought she might be the prisoner's wife coming to see her husband, and we should certainly get some bucksheesh; however, such is my luck." He thought Kutab a lucky chap to have both the Sultan and the Sultana under his thumb. Then he awoke Kutab's servant, Fateh Khan, who had fallen asleep in a watch-house near by. The latter was drowsy, and when he heard that the ring had not been obtained, he went to sleep again. Golam Ali Khan himself reflected, that as long as there was no ring

to send, he might have another smoke in peace.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was midnight, but Shakti wandered on fearlessly. She was accustomed to midnight walks, for had she not often in those six years of her pilgrimage wandered at late hours of the night! She crossed the woods she knew so well, and the trees seemed to extend their branches like welcoming arms, all greeted her as an old friend. She soon reached the river side. She saw the tamarind tree, on which they once had sat, Ganesh and she, on that eventful night long years ago, which had become the turning point in Shakti's life. Its branches were all gone, only the knarled trunk remained. Was it not thus too with her life? All beauty gone, only grim reality facing her.

Now she came to that memorable spot where she had undergone her great soul trial. There stood the pipul tree where she had crushed the wreath she loved so well. A minute here she lingered. Each grain of dust seemed sanctified, for with it now were mingled those faded blossoms, the crushed hope of her life. She stooped and took a handful of the earth and tied it in a corner of her royal sari and then resumed her walk.

Soon she reached the half-ruined temple, where still officiated the holy Mataji, her aunt. A light shone through a crease in the door now as of old. She saw with her mind's eye the sannyasini as she used to see her squatting before an oil-lamp, praying. She came to the unbolted door and pushed it gently open. Yes, there sat the priestess praying with eyes closed. But the light was not that of an oil-lamp, it was a sacrificial fire that sent its blaze on high. The door between the two apartments was now open and the flame burnt before Kali's image.

Shakti stood noiselessly, the priestess did not notice her. She recited mantras with measured breath and fed the fire anew with oblations, until the surging flames soared up and touched the ceiling. They seemed to Shakti like a fountain of blood, soaring upward and falling back again like severed human heads. Then the flames became more subdued, and now it seemed the heads were ranging themselves into a square, and upon it rose a throne of light. Whose image was that seated on this throne? The Sultana tried to identify the face, when the yogini spoke again.

"O Thou Omnipotent One, Thou Fountain of Life, be propitious. Thou hast created all that is, Thou preservest by Thy mercy or destroyest by Thy anger. And in Thy anger Thou hast brought woe on our motherland. But now, let Thy compassion

speak, O 'Thou Infinite Mercy, remove this sorrow from our heads and liberate him who now lies fettered, the son of the old heroes of our land. Oh, touch his manly heart with Thy great Spirit that he may rise and lift oppression from his race."

The woman who stood by the door felt inspiration throbbing through her being. Moved by a voice that came from higher spheres, she spoke, "Then be it so, the great God sent me hither to accomplish this."

The priestess looked proud, "Shakti, Sultana, you will liberate him?"

"I would already have done so, but he will not take freedom from my hands. Come with me, holy mother, he will accept liberty if you offer it. This ring will admit us, and you can take him with you and escape with him."

The Mataji rose to go, but Shakti stopped her, saying "Wait, mother, give me another dress."

The sannyasini brought out one of those traditional ochre-coloured robes, and Shakti put it on and rubbed on her body some of the sacred earth she had brought. She put half of her jewelled sari over the devotee's dress she now wore; she cut her long shawl into halves, wound one part round herself, and the other she gave to her companion as a disguise, together with that part of her jewel-embroidered sari that she had torn off while in the prison cell. Then she directed her saying, "Put this

shawl over your head, holy mother, and wear this sari. On entering the prison I will give you the sari and shawl I am wearing. Direct Ganesh to put them on as I wore them, and see that his head is well covered. Then you will appear going out the same as we did on entering, and the prison guards will not suspect what has happened."

"And you, my child?" asked the yogini calmly.

"I will remain behind. Kutab will come to my aid later on."

The sannyasini understood the risk that Shaktimayi ran, but she made no effort to dissuade her. She only smiled, for what is death to the devotee who has faced the Infinite? This mortal life is not the highest gift that man possesses, and death as a sacrifice in a just cause is a great boon!

"One thing remains," said Shakti, "cut off my hair."

The devotee complied with her request and Shaktimayi gave her those long, black, silky locks and said, "If Gul Bahar becomes motherless, give her these as a last token from me, and remember from to-night she is your child."

The priestess laid the hair under Kali's feet and muttered a prayer, while Shakti stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Maharaja, Maharaja," called the sannyasini. Ganesh Dev started from his sleep and exclaimed, "No, Shakti, no ; I will not leave the cell, tempt me no more."

"Child, it is I. I have come to set you free."

Ganesh Dev recognised the priestess. Yes, from the devotee he could accept his freedom, he was in silence waiting for her. He dressed himself as the Mataji directed.

The Mataji then knocked at the door which was opened and together they went out. The heavy door was closed again ; the Sultana was in the prison cell alone. She had entered with the yogini and hidden herself in a corner, where she remained cold and trembling with fear lest he discover her. But now that he was gone she breathed a deep sigh of relief. Her work was done, Ganesh was free. This is the revenge of Shaktimayi, the great-souled Hindu woman !

It had often seemed to her that not even one wish her life had known had ever been fulfilled. But at last the gods had taken compassion on her, and her supreme desire was gratified at the end. And this fulfilment was so dear, so soul satisfying, that it compensated for all her blighted hopes in the past and her being was full to overflowing with a boundless bliss. She thanked

